THE CITY OF THE MOON GOD

RELIGIONS IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

FORMERLY

ÉTUDES PRÉLIMINAIRES
AUX RELIGIONS ORIENTALES
DANS L'EMPIRE ROMAIN

EDITORS
R. VAN DEN BROEK H.J.W. DRIJVERS
H.S. VERSNEL

VOLUME 114

THE CITY OF THE MOON GOD

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF HARRAN

BY

TAMARA M. GREEN

E.J. BRILL
LEIDEN • NEW YORK • KÖLN
1992

The series Religions in the Graeco-Roman World presents a forum for studies in the social and cultural function of religions in the Greek and the Roman world, dealing with pagan religions both in their own right and in their interaction with and influence on Christianity and Judaism during a lengthy period of fundamental change. Special attention will be given to the religious history of regions and cities which illustrate the practical workings of these processes.
Enquiries regarding the submission of works for publication in the series may be directed to Professor H.J.W. Drijvers, Faculty of Letters, University of Groningen, 9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Green, Tamara M.
The city of the Moon god: religious traditions of Harran / by Tamara M. Green.
p. cm.—(Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, ISSN 0927-7633 v. 114=Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 9004095136 (alk. paper)
1. Harran (Turkey)—Religion. 2. Cults—Turkey—Harran. 3. Moon worship. 4. Islam—Origin. I. Title. II. Series: Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain; t. 114.
BL2320.G74 1992
291'.0935—dc20 91-39380
CIP

ISSN 0927-7633
ISBN 90 04 09513 6

© *Copyright 1992 by E.J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands*

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or translated in any form, by print, photoprint, microfilm, microfiche or any other means without written permission from the publisher

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use is granted by E.J. Brill provided that the appropriate fees are paid directly to Copyright Clearance Center, 27 Congress Street, SALEM MA 01970, USA. Fees are subject to change.

PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements VII

Introduction 1

Chapter One: *Harranian Religion: from the City's Foundation to the Fall of Nabonidus* 19

Historical backgrounds: 2000 – 539 B.C.E.
Harranian Religion
Introduction ... The Moon God ... The Moon God as Fertility Deity ... Fertility and the Underworld ... The Moon God and the Demonic World ... The "Lamp of Heaven" and Prophecy ... The Moon God and the Power of Kings ... The Moon, Astral Religion and Astrology in Mesopotamia

Chapter Two: *Harranian Religion: from Alexander to the Muslim Conquest* 44

Historical backgrounds: 539 B.C.E. – 640 C.E.
Alexander the Great and the Seleucids ... Parthians and Arabs ... Harran in the Roman Period (65 B.C.E. – 363 C.E.) ... From Julian to the Muslim Conquest (363 – 639 C.E.)
The Religion of Harran: Survival and Continuity
Bath Nikkal, Tarʿatha and al-ʿUzza ... The Moon and the Sun ... The Gods at Sumatar Harabesi ... My Lord with His Dogs

Chapter Three: *Harranian Religion: Syncretism and Assimilation* 74

The Identification of Traditions
Language and Texts ... Christianity at Edessa ... Persians and Semites ... Greeks and the Near East ... Greek Philosophers and the Traditions of Wisdom ... Hermes Trismegistus and the Hermetic Tradition

Chapter Four: *Harran After the Muslim Conquest: Muslims and Sabians* 94

Historical Backgrounds: 640 – 1271 C.E.
Harran and the Identity of the Harranians

Introduction . . . The Sabians of the *Qurʾan*: Chwolsohn and his critics

Chapter Five: *Muslim Sources* 124

Introduction
ʿ*Ilm* and *Fiqh*
Kalam and *Falsafah*
Kalam and Esoteric Islam
The Writing of History

Chapter Six: *Harranian Paganism and Islam* 144

Introduction
The Calendars of the *Catalog* and the *Chronology*
Traditional Worship in the *Catalog* and the *Chronology*
The Moon God and Other Male Deities . . . al-ʿUzza, Tarʿatha and Bath Nikkal
Evidence for a Planetary Cult in the *Catalog*
Conclusions

Chapter Seven: *Harran, Hermeticism and Esoteric Islam* 162

Introduction
Greek Philosophy and Harran
Harran and the Hermetic Tradition
Harran and the Esoteric Sciences
Astrology . . . Alchemy
The "Brethren of Purity" and the Harranians
Conclusions

Chapter Eight: *The Mysteries of the Sabians According to Muslim Sources* 191

Introduction
The *Catalog* of Ibn al-Nadim
The "Mystery to the North" . . . The Mysteries of the North and Mesopotamian Demonology
The Mysteries of the House of the Bughadharis
The Mandaeans and the Sabian Mysteries
The "Brethren of Purity" and the Sabian Mysteries
The *Aim of the Sage*
Masʿudi
Conclusions

Selected Bibliography 218

General Index 225

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council for their support during the earliest stages of this work. A grant from the ACLS allowed me to study sociological theory with Professor Peter Berger, with whom I spent many stimulating afternoons discussing the theoretical framework of this work. The SSRC generously supported the initial research, including a remarkable trip to Harran and Edessa.

Two institutions deserving much gratitude are the Warburg Institute in London and the Oriental Room of the New York Public Library; the professional assistance and unfailing courtesy of their staffs were a marvel to behold.

The seeds of this book were planted more than 25 years ago in an undergraduate course in Near Eastern history at New York University taught by F.E. Peters. Later, as thesis advisor, and then as colleague and friend, he unfailingly provided a model of scholarship that I have tried hard to emulate. Most recently, Frank has proved to be a patient listener and perceptive critic of this work.

Thanks must also be given to Karl Schaefer, who taught me Arabic, and to J.B. Segal, who was kind enough to spend an afternoon discussing with me the the archaeological puzzles presented by Harran, and who graciously allowed me to consult unpublished site reports. Professor Gordon Newby of the University of North Carolina was an attentive reader of the manuscript, and I am grateful for his comments and suggestions.

A continuing source of knowledge about Near Eastern religion, both pagan and Christian, in the late antique period has been H.J.W. Drijvers, who read a draft of this work, and who has provided both innumerable bibliographical references and illuminating comments on complex textual problems. His friendship has been one of the most delightful consequences of this research.

Much affection and gratitude are felt toward my colleagues in the Department of Classical and Oriental Studies at Hunter College who tolerantly listened to my expositions on topics as diverse as Islamic theology and hermetic doctrine. Two must be especially singled out: the late Claireve Grandjouan, who enthusiastically encouraged me as I ventured outside the field of classics; and Robert

J. White, who not only listened tolerantly but also cheerfully assumed my duties as chairman of the Department for a semester so that this study might be completed.

This work is dedicated to my husband, Martin Green, who has served faithfully and lovingly as listening post, editor, computer consultant, traveling companion and brewer of endless pots of coffee.

INTRODUCTION

"Survival is never mere continuity, but the continuity of change."
. . . Henri Frankfort

Twenty-five miles southeast of the busy commercial city of Urfa, once called Edessa, and now a provincial capital in southeastern Turkey, lie the ruins of the city of Harran. Harran, whose climate Ammianus Marcellinus described as very mild in the winter and very hot in the summer, with an abundance of gnats and lions,[1] is situated on the Jullab river near the source of the Balikh at the intersection of several ancient caravan routes to Asia Minor, Syria and Mesopotamia.

Edessa's chief rival in late antiquity, Harran's most notable features now are a few distinctive beehive-shaped mud brick houses that once dotted the region and the remains of an eighth-century Ummayad fortress-palace complex. Partially standing, too, are the walls of a mosque, which also had its foundations in the Ummayad period, but which was enlarged and rebuilt several times, for the last time at the end of the twelfth century, when it was restored by Saladin. The ruins of an extensive city wall can still be seen; and almost completely intact is the upper part of the Aleppo gate, seeming now to extend open to nowhere, and which is dated by an inscription to A.H. 588 (1192 C.E.).

The surrounding landscape is desolate, the lack of an adequate water supply everywhere evident. It seems almost beyond the capabilities of the imagination to recognize in these ruins a city which had its foundation in the early second millennium B.C.E., a city where the patriarch Abraham, it is claimed, had once resided amid poplar, almond and plane trees,[2] whose prosperity the Prophet Elijah had noted, and that had, at its height, perhaps 20,000 inhabitants. Impossible to visualize, too, is the great temple of the Moon god, Sin, the protecting deity of Harran, whose oracles were sought by succeeding generations of Semites, Persians, Greeks and Romans.

---

[1] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, XVIII.7,5.
[2] *Genesis* 30:37.

A Mesopotamian city first founded as a merchant outpost by Ur, it later became the home of Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians; after the fall of the last ruler of Babylon, Nabonidus, in the sixth century B.C.E., it was absorbed into the Persian empire. Several centuries later, Alexander's victories brought to Harran a Greek intellectual life already partially transmuted by its contact with the Near East. And although Harran was notorious among Christians for the persistent practices of its ancient rites and cults well after the official victory of the Church, early Syriac Christianity had found its strongest supporters in nearby Edessa and Nisibis. It was these variegated traditions that the Muslims inherited when the city fell to the armies of Islam in 639 C.E.

When the Muslims conquered Harran, they thus became the possessors of a city whose 2,500 year history encompassed much that must have been familiar to them. Harran's most recent rulers had been of Arab stock; at least some of the ancient Semitic deities still worshipped there struck a responsive chord among those newly converted to Islam, even as they discovered that Harran claimed to have been the home of the patriarch Abraham whom Islam now appropriated as its own. But there was also much at Harran that was alien to the Muslims, for Persian and Greek occupiers of the city had superimposed on top of these earlier traditions their own intellectual and religious inheritance.

According to an account of the Muslim conquests of Mesopotamia preserved by Baladhuri,[3] when Iyadh al-Ghanam stood before the walls of Edessa in 639 C.E., he declared to the Bishop of Edessa, "if you open the gate of the city to me and pay over to me one dinar per person (each year) and two bushels of cornmeal, you could then be untroubled in regard to yourselves, your property and goods and relatives. It is your duty to indicate the way to those going astray, to preserve the bridges and streets, and to give good advice to the believers. Allah is witness and the testimony of Allah is sufficient." Such a promise, however, could be made only to those who could be classified as *dhimmis*, or "covenanters," those who had been granted a treaty of submission and protection by their new Muslim rulers.

Islam's interpretation and evaluation of the meaning of these

---

[3] *Kitab Futuḥ al-buldan*, 174.

varied traditions were made more complex by the identification, by at least some Muslims, of the Harranians with the Sabians, mentioned enigmatically in the *Qurʾan* and who, like the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians, were People of the Book, possessors of a revealed scripture that entitled them to a measure of toleration within the "Abode of Islam" *(Dār al-Islam)*.

For those who were regarded by the Muslims as idolators or polytheists, however, the choices were conversion, slavery or death, for this "covenant" was available only to those groups who were considered by Islam to be "People of the Book," i.e., those who possessed a divinely revealed Scripture. To those so defined was given some measure of religious freedom, within the bounds of certain theological and legal restrictions; they had to pay both a collective land tax and an individual poll tax to their new Muslim rulers, but could govern themselves by their own community law, while acknowledging the rule of Islam. It was forbidden to seek to convert a Muslim to another faith, and once converted to Islam, to apostasize.

The religious foundation for such a practice was found, as always in Islam, in both the *Qurʾan* itself and in the examples of Muḥammad's own treatment of Jews and Christians.

> Believers, Jews, Christians and Sabians—whoever believes in Allah and the last day and does what is right—shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear (2.62, repeated 5.69)

and

> As for the true believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the pagans, Allah will judge them on the day of the Resurrection (22.17)

Despite the sacred authority of these two passages, however, two problems presented themselves to interpreters of the *Qurʾan*. The first was one of definition: who is to be included among Jews, Christians, Magians and Sabians? Within the first three groups, there is, of course, a wide spectrum of belief and practice, but the identity of the last named Sabians was a question from the earliest period of the Muslim conquest.

Secondly, the *Qurʾan* is ambivalent in its attitudes towards other revealed religions, for proclamations of tolerance are elsewhere balanced by a rather wary hostility toward Christianity and especially Judaism, perhaps reflecting a period when the Prophet was in

conflict with both these faiths.[4] As a result, the practical consequences of the formal relationship established by Islamic law between Muslims and non-Muslims who lived within the Abode of Islam in the years immediately following the Islamic conquest are often quite difficult to determine, for the attested discrepancy between the theoretical prescriptions of Islamic law and their actual application is sometimes very great, varying over place and time.

Although the *Qurʾan* would appear to be quite specific in limiting those who might gain protection and the formal structure which would determine the relationship between Muslim conqueror and non-Muslim subject was, at least according to tradition, established as early as the second caliph, in reality, the Muslims, as long as they remained a numerical minority, were generally quite tolerant in granting the status of "covenanters" to a great variety of religious groups not mentioned in the *Qurʾan*. To some extent this tolerance was the result of the fact that the Prophet's own interpretation of the beliefs of those he labeled as "People of the Book" was sometimes hard to retrieve. As Muslims became the majority within the Abode of Islam and with the resultant Islamization of the state, however, the judicial definition of "People of the Book" and the interpretation of the legal and social rights of covenant tended to become more restrictive.

We shall begin our account of the religious history of Harran with a story that is, in all probability, untrue, but nonetheless instructive. The tenth century Muslim encyclopaedist Ibn al-Nadim relates the following incident in Chapter 9 of his *Catalog*. The Caliph Maʾmun, on his way to attack the territory of the Byzantines, passed through the ancient Mesopotamian city of Harran in the year 830 C.E. There he saw a group of men wearing short gowns and who had long hair with side curls. "Which of the 'covenanters' are you? Are you Jews? are you Christians? Are you Magians?" he asked. To all these questions they answered no. "Do you have a Book or a prophet?" To this they made no reply, and Maʾmun declared, "Then you are unbelievers, the slaves of idols, 'Adherents of the Head,' (*Aṣḥab al-Raʾs*), who lived during the days of my father Rashid. As far as you

---

[4] e.g., A.S. Tritton, "Islam and the Protected Religions," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (April, 1931), 313–338, and more recently B. Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, 1984).

are concerned, it is legitimate to shed your blood, as there is no covenant establishing you as protected subjects."

The Harranians replied, "We will pay the poll tax." But the Caliph refused. "The poll tax is accepted only from persons who are members of those non-Islamic sects which God, may His name be exalted and magnified, mentioned in His Book, and who have a Book of their own, assuring them of good relations with the Muslims. As you do not belong to one or other of these groups, now choose one of two alternatives: Either embrace the religion of Islam, or else one of those religions which God mentioned in his Book. Otherwise, I will slay you to the last man. I will grant you a delay until I return from this journey of mine. Then, unless you have entered into Islam or one of the religions among the faiths mentioned by God in His Book, I will order your slaughter and the extermination of your evil-doing."

According to Ibn al-Nadim, after Ma'mun's departure some of these Harranians became Christians, while others adopted Islam, but a small number remained as they had been. A Muslim shaykh, who was an inhabitant of Harran, offered this last group the following advice, for a fee. "When Ma'mun returns from his journey, say to him, 'We are Sabians,' for this is the name of a religion which God, may his name be exalted, mentioned in the *Qur'an*. Profess it and you will be saved by it." Due, perhaps, to the will of Allah, Ma'mun died shortly after his visit to Harran; and Ibn al-Nadim reports that when the news of his death reached Harran, those who had taken the jurist's advice, as well as those who had converted to Christianity, returned to their former customs; and even those who had adopted Islam, although now unable to recant, continued to practice their former religion secretly.

It is clear from Ma'mun's questions that even the Caliph himself seems to have been unaware of the existence of a people called the Sabians, for they were not among those he himself mentioned as People of the Book. It would seem likely that theoretically, at least, according to the strictures of the covenant (*dhimma*), the devout Christians of Edessa, whose Church claimed pre-apostolic foundations, would finally have their revenge on that place they called "the city of the Hellenes," i.e., pagans; Christianity could and would survive, albeit in truncated form, at Edessa, while the pagans of Harran, who had so vigorously resisted the imperial edicts to adopt the Christian faith, would be forced now to make the choice among

conversion to Islam, slavery or death. Harran would then have become another of the ancient cities of the Near East whose pagan beliefs and practices disappeared under the weight of a more powerful set of traditions. What happened instead is that Harran was incorporated into the sacred geography of Islam.

Although Ma'mun never returned to Harran in order to ascertain whether his commands had been followed, the questions of who and what the Sabians of the *Qur'an* were, how they came to be associated with Harran, and what role they played both in the history of religious belief and practice of the Near East and in the development of Islamic intellectual and theological inquiry, have continued to be matters of sometimes acrimonious debate since the time of the great Caliph, and long after the destruction of the city itself.

The story of the Harranians' encounter with the Caliph in the *Catalog* underscores the difficulty in attempting to interpret the nature of the beliefs of those inhabitants of Harran who, according to Ibn al-Nadim, adopted the name of Sabian in order to gain favored status under Islamic rule, for there are no further references in the *Qur'an* to the Sabians nor any sources contemporary with the *Qur'an* which might serve to elucidate what the *Qur'an* meant to include under that name. To what extent the various branches of Islam accepted, reshaped or reinterpeted the history of Harran and its multiplicity of religious and intellectual traditions is the object of this study.

Constructing a Model

Before we can understand how Harran took on meaning within the context of conflicting Muslim ideologies, we must first examine the development of and shape of its pre-Islamic structures. Such an investigation demands a conceptual framework which will take into account not only the historical processes by which the inhabitants of the city had in the course of its history constructed and maintained their own definitions of reality in the face of constantly changing patterns of culture, but also the various world views which determined the sometimes contradictory perceptions of Harran on the part of the Muslims.

The starting point is to be found in the recognition that in any given culture, social reality, which gives meaning and coherence to the world, is the product of human activity. Every group constructs a world view that both explains and is the foundation of its reality.

Man is, in the words of the sociologist Peter Berger, capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product.[5] Man looks at the products of his activities and, in essence, forgets that he has produced them, seeing them instead as something other than a human product—e.g., as acts of nature, as the result of cosmic laws, as the operation of divine will. Particular forms of knowledge, for example, are cast as unattainable by human inquiry and activity, and are seen as a form of divine revelation. Thus, astronomy is not the result of human observation and discovery, but an otherwise unknowable science taught to man by the gods, and the rules of law are not the product of societal evolution, but rather, may be seen as divinely given or laid down at the beginning of time.

The socially constructed world, once reified or objectified, is the reality to which all members of the group will then subscribe, and they will measure and define all their experience by it. It is only within the terms of the knowledge of this institutional order that reality becomes "real," as it were. It is, within any particular group, the sum and total of "what everybody knows."[6] And once these institutions which define reality are operational, any deviation from them is seen as a departure from reality; thus, this knowledge provides the definition of what is knowable, or at least, the framework into which anything not yet known must fit. It is the way we make sense of our world. Of course, not everyone within the group may know the same things; and in a more complex society, the number of groups who have specialized knowledge, which Berger calls subuniverses, proliferates. Nevertheless, the sum total of what all these groups know must in some way be made to fit, at least minimally, a coherent view that the entire culture can comprehend.

Although capable of modification and change, social institutions, once formed, have a tendency to persist.[7] They can be passed from one generation to another, both as an externalized objective reality and as an internalized subjective reality: in other words, as real for both the group and the individual. Indeed, it is in the transmission of these institutions from one generation to another that the reality

---

[5] P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1966).

[6] Berger, 65.

[7] Berger, 81.

of the social world gains in force. But in order for these institutions to be transmitted successfully, the next generation must have explanations for these institutions; their existence needs to be validated, made legitimate. It is through the process of legitimation that "why things are the way they are" can be explained, and it may take place on several levels.

The highest of these processes is the creation of what Berger labels "symbolic universes." They are symbolic inasmuch as they refer to realities other than those of everyday experience and their source is language which is capable of transcending the here and now.[8] Language can construct abstract symbol systems and make them a part of everyday life. The most recurrent of these symbol systems are religion, philosophy, art, science; and it is through the use of these systems that a society creates its symbolic universes.

The symbolic universe serves as an all-encompassing frame of reference for both the society and the individual, the matrix at which all other realities are brought together; it is the cosmic glue.[9] It is the means by which history is ordered, linking a culture with its past and its future; it is the means by which the social world is is made objectively true; it is the means by which different spheres of reality are brought together in society; it is the means by which the individual locates himself in that social world; it is the means by which the world of man and the world of nature are linked, thereby giving each significance.[10] Symbolic universes help to construct a comprehensively meaningful world; ultimately, they are called upon to validate human existence, and to demonstrate that all of reality is meaningful.

Like every other expression of reality, symbolic universes are the historical products of human activity, and thus are subject to change. Every symbolic universe is a "social product with a history," and in order to understand what it means and how it validates the reality of a particular culture, one must first understand the history of its production. In the ancient world there were a few individuals, most notably among the Greeks, who understood the notion of cultural relativity and who recognized that such "reality-maintenance" machinery was a social product; but by and large, the

---

[8] Berger, 96.
[9] Berger, 97.
[10] Berger, 101–107.

response to alien ideologies was either to deny them or to reinterpret them in order to find a place for them within the already established reality.

Yet, it is obvious that different cultures construct reality in different ways; over time, realities may shift, and even within a single culture, conflicting realities may arise. "Deviant" constructions of symbolic universes may arise within the group, representing a challenge to its already established reality, and thus provide an alternative definition of reality which may in turn modify, alter or even replace the original symbolic universe. The appearance of alternative symbolic universes poses a threat because it opens the possibility that one's own universe is "less than inevitable." Thus there must arise conceptual machineries for "universe-maintenance." Such machineries can range from mythology to theology, philosophy and science; all may exist side by side, either harmoniously or in competition. But in the end, the survival of a symbolic universe is dependent upon the success of its "reality-maintenance" machinery.

It is easier to explicate the external social and historical processes which create symbolic universes within a particular culture than to understand the psychological mechanisms by which the individual comprehends them. Within highly structured cultures, expression of the experience of the divine tends to be multi-dimensional, extending itself from the world of nature into the world of man, providing a commonality of experience for culture and nature, establishing a link between man and the divine. However it may be formulated, such expression is rooted in that moment of recognition within a particular situation or phenomenon of the existence of a power that is "wholly other," numinous,[11] seemingly beyond human comprehension and outside of human manipulation; and in its earliest manifestation in human consciousness, it is bound to and limited by the phenomenon through which this power is revealed. When the phenomenon disappears, so, too, does the experience of the numinous vanish.

Only at a later developmental stage of human and societal cognition will this experience be apprehended through the more persistent external form of what contains the numinous power and which is now perceived as separate from that power, i.e., as a divinity.

---

[11] R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London, 1950), 5.

Nevertheless, that earliest recognition of numinous "otherness" is never completely submerged. The continuing layering of meaning most often reveals itself through iconographic representation and naming; the Mesopotamian Moon god is thus both the power inherent in the moon and the moon itself, and is represented as the lunar crescent. Finally, in the attempt to make the numinous more comprehensible and to connect it to human experience, these expressions are given the concrete form of living beings, credited with human social and political attributes, values and behavior, all the while still encompassing earlier perceptions and iconographic patterns. The conservativeness of human response to the worlds of nature and culture is everywhere evident.

Thus, in addition to their functions within the realm of the nonhuman world, arising out of the recognition of "otherness," the deities of the Sumerian and Assyro-Babylonian pantheons, for example, also have, in their most complete manifestation, assigned roles in a divine political hierarchy, in which divine nature and human culture are linked; nature becomes politicized and extends itself into the world of men, while political structure is seen as originating within the context of the natural world. Each deity has dominion over not only part of the natural cosmos, but various aspects of the human social and political structure as well, acting all the while as a mediator between man and the natural world. The homogeneity of the reports for the cult of the moon god in that earliest period of Harran's religious history may reveal the homogeneity of Mesopotamian culture, but multiple layers of foreign and sometimes alien rule created a prism through which the lowest substratum has to be viewed. By the time of the Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia, Babylonian, Assyrian, Jewish, Greek, Roman and Syriac Christian already had constructed their own interpretations of Harranian religion, but those perceptions were believable to Muslims only to the extent that they confirmed what they already knew about the nature of history. "Noone," said St. Augustine, "believes anything unless he previously knows it to be believable."

Abraham and Harran

Harran possessed a numinous quality, arising out of its earliest associations with the Moon god, that was to endure for three millennia. But for the Jew, Christian and ultimately the Muslim, it was

the figure of Abraham, who came to Harran from Ur of the Chaldees, which imbued the spot with holiness.[12] In Genesis, Harran plays a central role in the life of Abraham. It was to that place that Terah, Abraham and Lot and their families came when they left Ur of the Chaldees (11:31); later midrashic tradition says that they found the land pleasant, and also the inhabitants, "who readily yielded to the influence of Abraham's humane spirit and his piety. Many of them obeyed his precepts and became God-fearing and good." It was from Harran that Abraham and his wife, along with his followers, departed for the land of Canaan (12:4-6); it was to Harran that Abraham sent for a bride for his son Isaac (24:10). The descendants of Abraham maintained the connection: Jacob was sent there by Rebecca in order to escape the anger of Esau, and lived there for 20 years, winning two brides in the process.

The earliest history of the patriarchs is bound up with a city called Harran; and while it has been suggested that the Harran of Genesis cannot be the city we have been considering, for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the question is moot, for the traditions of each have identified this Harran with the city of Abraham.[13] In the fifth century, there stood at Harran the Christian monastery of Abraham; the twelfth century Jewish traveler, Benjamin of Tudela, noted "the place on which our father Abraham's house had stood," and the missionary G.P. Badger, who visited Harran in the 1840s, reported that a Muslim shrine outside the wall, dedicated to a certain Shaykh Yahya, was said by the Christians to contain the grave of Terah, Abraham's father.[14] Harran became for all three faiths a part of their own sacred history, a place that could be located within the sacred geography of all three; the city's holiness transcends its physical location.

The Old Testament patriarchs, whose relationship with God had been based on personal covenant, rather than Mosaic law, play a special role in Christian sacred history. Because of Abraham, Harran had been the departure point for the making of the covenant established between God and his chosen people; through Jacob, it was the place of foundation of the nation of Israel. In the early

---

[12] Genesis 11:31.

[13] A. Mez, *Geschichte der Stadte Harran in Mesopotamien bis zum Einfall der Araber* (Strassbourg, 1892), among others.

[14] G.P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their Rituals* (London, 1852), 342.

Christian period, such a view was especially prevalent in Mesopotamia, which had played such an important role in the earliest history of the Jews, and where, at that time, the presence of several large Jewish communities served as a constant reminder of the continuity of that past. In the Book of Acts, Stephen says to the high priest:

> Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; the God of glory. . . said unto him, Get thee out of the country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I now show thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Harran; and from thence, when his father was dead, He removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.(7:4)

Finally, in the Muslims' own tradition, Abraham is the most important figure before Muḥammad, for his role was two-fold: first, he was the builder of the Kaʿbah at Mecca and the father of Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arab peoples; second, he is also the founder of the pure faith, a *ḥanif*, the first monotheist, "a Muslim before the *Qurʾan* . . .(who) never lost the conviction that what had been revealed to him was the same as that which had been given to the other *ahl al-kitab*." [15] For the Muslim, it was Abraham's pure faith that Allah revealed in the *Qurʾan* and that would be restored by the Prophet.

It is possible that the role of the patriarch in Islam was shaped by local traditions about Abraham at Medina, where Muḥammad attempted to win over the Jewish community by representing his revelation as the restoration of the religion of Abraham. Folk tales based on biblical figures seem to have been common property in Medina, and it is possible that Muḥammad's perception of the patriarch and his faith were filtered through these oral traditions. Although the connection is not made in the *Qurʾan*, the association of the patriarch with the city of the moon god had been established by the Muslims as early as the seventh century by Ibn al-ʿAbbas, cousin of the prophet and collector of *ḥadith* (d. 687 C.E.), and Kaʿb al-Aḥbar, a Jewish convert to Islam and scholar at the court of Muʿawiyah (d. 652 C.E.?), and thus seems to have been established before any connection between the Sabians and Harran was established in Muslim sources.

It was this association of Abraham with Harran that served to reinforce the Muslim perception of Harran as a sacred place and,

---

[15] F.E. Peters, *The Children of Abraham* (Princeton, 1982), 197 ff.

for at least some Muslims, the Harranians as the inheritors of a sacred tradition.[16] It is not surprising, then, to see Harran mentioned in connection with the story of Abraham by many Muslim authors, who perhaps learned of its connection with the father of Ishmael through closer contact with Jews within the Abode of Islam. Thus, for Islam, Harran, whatever other associations it might gather, began as a place in a sacred geography, as the starting point of a divine path that led from Abraham to Muḥammad.

Benjamin of Tudela declared that the Muslims held the place (of Abraham's home) in great respect "and perform their devotions there;"[17] and Muslim sources make it clear that non-Muslim Harranians were aware of that tradition. In his account of Harran, the tenth century geographer Ibn Ḥawqal reports that the Sabians' place of worship is "on a lofty heap, which they ascribe to Abraham . . .This place they hold in high veneration, esteeming it holy and making pilgrimages to it from other quarters."[18] This may be the same shrine of Abraham described by ʿAli al-Ḥarawi (d. 1214 C.E.) as *mashhad al-ṣakhra*, the "Sanctuary of the rock," on which "it is said that Abraham used to sit while tending his sheep."[19]

The Qurʾanic commentator Kisaʾi (d. 795 C.E.?) tells an interesting story that brings together the Hermetic traditions of Harran and Abraham: Abraham came to Harran and attempted to convert the Sabians, who possessed writings that had been handed down from Seth and Idris. Idris had revealed to his son: "know you are a Sabian." Some of the Harranians accepted the faith of Abraham, but some refused saying, "How can we believe you, since you read no Book?" Those who did not follow Abraham have remained in the neighborhood of Harran, and declare, "we acknowledge the religion of Seth, Idris and Noah."[20] And finally the twelfth century traveler Ibn Jubayr recognized how the power of Abraham's holiness had embraced Islam at Harran:

---

[16] See, for an illuminating discussion of the Muslim traditions about the wanderings of Abraham, R. Firestone, *The Evolution of Islamic Narrative Exegesis in the Abraham-Ishmael Legends*, (unpublished dissertation, New York University, 1988).

[17] Benjamin ben Jonah of Tudela, *Itinerary*, ed. and trans. A. Asher (1840; rpt. Malibu, California, 1983), pl. 51.

[18] Chwolsohn II, 547.

[19] ʿAli al-Ḥarawi, *Kitab al-Isharat*, cited in D.S. Rice, "Medieval Harran," *Anatolian Studies* II (1952), 42.

[20] Chwolsohn II, 502–3.

> "South of the city, about three parasangs distant, is a blessed shrine which contains a running spring that was a dwelling place for him and Sarah—the blessing of God upon them both—and was their place of worship. Because of this connection, God has made the city an abode of holy saints and a site for unworldly anchorites."[21]

But the presence of Abraham alone does not fully explain the presence of the city in a variety of Muslim ideologies. For that, we must reach back behind its Jewish, Christian and Islamic significance to the Moon god who ruled Harran from its beginnings. It is most likely that it was on the site of his great temple that the Muslim rulers of the city constructed the Great Mosque.

Constructing History

The construction of a history of the religious beliefs and practices of the city of Harran necessarily entails an examination of the confluence of traditions that shaped not only the realities but the interpretations of those realities over a period of nearly three thousand years. The history of religious experience is notoriously difficult to delineate, given its often ineffable quality; and the tracing of a religious ideology over time and through a variety of cultures is made more complex by the fact that each society develops its own particularized understanding of the meaning of history that shapes the recording of it.

The past is, as M.I. Finley says, "an intractible incomprehensive mass of uncounted and uncountable data," made intelligible only through the making of meaning that is itself the product of human choice; the writing of history arises out of the human propensity for creating unified thought.[22] It is one of the ways of imposing meaning upon seeming chaos, of making sense of the world, for historians write about the past not only to embed it in cultural memory and to endow past events with significance, but in order to make sense of the present. It is one of the ways in which social reality is constructed and maintained, for it is always the present cultural constructs that shape perceptions of the past: the past merely provides

---

[21] Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. R.J.C. Broadhurst (London, 1952), 254.

[22] M.I. Finley, "Myth, Memory and History," *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York, 1987), 13.

the basis of support both for the understanding of the present and for future expectations.

In revealed religions, sacred and secular history are inextricably bound together. The Jewish and Christian understanding of history grows out of sacred scripture; the very core of the Pentateuch is history, for it is an expository account of divine action within this world, beginning with the creation, and uniting the revelation of God's presence in this world with the history of the community in time. It contains the unfolding of a divine drama that is played out against the backdrop of human action, and provides the source for the human understanding of the meaning of God's actions. The message of the Gospels is announced within the context of the sacred history of the Pentateuch; for the Christian, the Gospels build upon and validate the reality of that earlier revelation, for the presence of Jesus in this world and his actions are a corroboration of that covenant made with Abraham, at the same time that it abrogated the Law that was revealed at Sinai. The history contained in scripture is thus both the source and product of the Jewish and Christian understanding of God's role in this world.

Although Muḥammad's revelation confirmed the earlier interventions of God within human history contained in Torah and the Gospels, the *Qurʾan* does not contain the same sort of narrative framework of God acting within history, and thus cannot be seen as a historical account of the continuation of that revelation that had begun with Abraham. Rather, at the core of Islam is a radical rereading of sacred history from that moment when God first spoke to Abraham. Because Muḥammad had seen himself, in effect, as returning to the natural pre-Torah faith of the patriarch, the revelation contained within the *Qurʾan* represented, in the eyes of most Muslims, a break with the past. At the same time, however, the understanding of the past as part of sacred history was necessary, because Muḥammad was the successor of earlier prophets whose revelations had been historical, and because the *ummah* (community) of Islam was both sacred and historical.

Inherent in the view of past as prologue to the present is a concern with the future unfolding of this divine drama. For all three faiths, the past not only explains the present but reveals the future as well; and thus the meaning of history is always understood to encompass the revelation of *ta eschata*, when human history will end. The traditionist view is that humans cannot know or fully comprehend God's

plan for the creation, but for at least some, however, the investigation of the past is merely the means to an end: revelatory vision of the future, when the hidden meaning of history would finally be disclosed.

Although from a theological perspective there can be no human history apart from the framework of revelation for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the distinction must be made between ideologies of history informed by sacred symbols and the construction of historical narratives as particular literary forms. Because the Jews continued to view their history as the consequence of the unfolding of this divine drama, there are relatively few secular Jewish historical texts in the period we are considering,[23] and they are, for the most part, the product of a hellenized sensibility. Christianity, on the other hand, embraced, albeit sometimes uneasily, the literary forms of Graeco-Roman historiography in order to demonstrate the intervention and continued presence of the divine in human history. Nevertheless, because classical culture had provided the intellectual foundations for the the development of Christian culture, the literary models for the writing of history remained irretrievably pagan.

The Islamic "traditional" sciences absorbed much of the content, but not the form, of the Hellenic tradition which they encountered. Among the Muslim historians, the development of historiography as a literary form owed a great deal both to the importance of tribal genealogies in pre-Islamic Bedouin culture and to the Muslim attempt to fix the sacred canon by the establishment of the "traditions of the Prophet" through *isnad*, a word that literally means a genealogy, but which, in the realm of Qurʾanic studies, came to mean the authority of the chain of authorities that could be traced back to Muḥammad or his companions. As a result, Muslim historians tended to pay close attention to the external credentials of their sources, with perhaps less concern for internal contradictions.

The complexity of evaluating the historical evolution of Harranian religion is compounded by the fact that there are great expanses during the long period under consideration about which our sources reveal little; we know of the past only what the past chooses to reveal to us. Moreover, this propensity for unified thought led at least some of the cultures under consideration to fill in the blank spaces in order

---

[23] The notable exception is, of course, Josephus.

to support a transcendent ideal, a process that often conceals, rather than reveals, the past. In addition, the history of antiquity must be constructed from a number of sources that do not directly concern themselves with the ordering of events from the traditional understanding of the meaning of historiographical processes. The cultural shaping of the past is not the product merely of those who are labelled historians; rather, it is whatever informs the ideology of the historian as well as all those within the culture who evaluate the past. It is grounded in the recognition that a culture's ideals are made manifest in the unfolding of history.

The construction of narrative out of that mass of data may impart coherence to events, but certainly narrative history is not the only means of understanding the past. The materials available for the history of Harran are of an extraordinary variety, ranging as they do from Assyrian royal annals to Christian hymns and apologetics, from Syriac inscriptions to Muslim jurisprudence and haeresiography, from Sumerian myth to Greek philosophy. Any consideration of the multiplicity of sources for the Harranians and/or the Sabians over a period of 3,000 years must thus encompass not only content but form—not only the kind of document, but also the historical, social, and religious context within which the document has been produced.

We must begin by asking the question of why Harran? The answer is tripartite and all three aspects concern the history of the city itself: Harran as the city associated with the biblical patriarch Abraham; Harran as the home of the Moon god who revealed to those who sought him the knowledge of the divine cosmos; Harran as a place of transmission of the traditions of Greek science and philosophy, in all their aspects, into Islam. The coming together of the traditions of three disparate cultures can be discerned in some of those same sources that previous scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim, have used in their attempt to identify the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* and their relationship to Harran.

At the city's foundation, the Moon god had claimed the role of guardian of Harran, and it was around this deity that the city organized and justified its world. The god's power manifested itself not only in the evening sky, but in his political role as the guarantor of royal power within the divine pantheon. But even as the political influence of the Moon god waned with the collapse of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, he took on new roles without ever com-

pletely yielding the old. Successive inhabitants of Harran continued to construct world views which had at their center the "lamp of heaven," but now recast to encompass other symbolic meanings.

What must be understood at the outset is that any definition of Harranian and/or Sabian belief and practice is a product of a variety of sensibilities, and it is only after a consideration of the various and sometimes conflicting ideologies that produced the texts used as evidence that we may be able to evaluate the data they present. Although modern scholarship may have to concede that the identity of the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* cannot be determined with any greater assurance than that possessed by the medieval Muslim explicators, we can still hope to understand the ways in which they came to be identified by some Muslims with the city of Harran. Our approach must be a two-fold one: first it is necessary to examine the pre-Islamic religious and cultural patterns of Harran, in order to uncover what aspects of the city's history resonated in the consciousness of at least some Muslims; we will then consider the various intellectual and religious traditions of Islam that produced such disparate and often conflicting views of the Sabians of Harran.

Certainly the greatness of many ancient cities has vanished as completely as that of Harran, cities richer, more powerful and more famous; but the fascination of Harran is not in its political or economic history, but rather, in what it has come to represent in the history of ideas, for the religious and intellectual history of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Harran offers the opportunity to examine the development of diverse symbolic universes, the various and competing conceptual machineries constructed for their maintenance, and the simultaneous persistence and transformation of traditions. The city of Harran compels the attention of both the intellectual historian and the sociologist of religion for two reasons: first, although we know very little about the intellectual traditions of Harran prior to the Muslim conquest, the city suddenly emerges as a likely candidate in the difficult search for the points of transmission of the multiform legacy of the late antique Greek world into Islam; secondly, in an investigation of ideological and religious continuity in the face of changing social structures, the city will provide an extraordinary case study.

CHAPTER ONE

HARRANIAN RELIGION: FROM THE CITY'S FOUNDATION TO THE FALL OF NABONIDUS

Historical Backgrounds: 2000–539 B.C.E.

Frequent references to Harran in a great variety of historical documents pertaining to northern Mesopotamia, beginning about 2000 B.C.E., attest to its great importance in antiquity, although only the scantiest physical evidence of the earliest period of its history survives. Reports in the royal letters from the city of Mari on the middle Euphrates indicate that the area around the Balikh river was occupied in the 19th century B.C.E. by a confederation of seminomadic tribes, who seem to have been especially active in the region near Harran.[1] Harran was founded as a merchant outpost by Ur, and the abundance of goods that passed through the area must have proved a temptation, for raids upon the caravans were frequent; the Assyrian king Shamshi-Adad I (1813–1781 B.C.E.) launched a carefully organized expedition to subdue the region, in order to protect the trade route which passed through Harran.

Harran's continuing role as a trading city along the mercantile routes of northern Mesopotamia in the first millennium B.C.E. is attested to by the prophet Ezekiel, who includes Harran among the cities that trafficked in luxury goods: "Haran, Canneh, Eden, Ashur and Chilmad traded with you. These traded with you in choice garments, in cloths of blue and embroidered work, and in carpets of colored stuff, bound with cords and made secure."[2] And later references in Roman authors such as Pliny indicate that Harran maintained an important position in the economic life of Northern Mesopotamia through the classical period.[3]

The city was a major post along the trade route between the Mediterranean and the plains of the middle Tigris, for it lay directly

---

[1] G. Dossin, "Benjamites dans les Textes de Mari," *Melanges Syriens Offerts a M. Rene Dussaud* (Paris, 1939), 986.

[2] Ezekiel xxvii.23.

[3] Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, XII.40.

on the road from Antioch eastward to Nisibis and Nineveh, whence the Tigris could be followed down to the delta to Babylon. There was another route, a much shorter one, from Antioch to Babylon: down the Euphrates through Carchemish, Anah and Hit. "From there (Harran) two different royal highways lead to Persia: the one on the left through Adiabene and over the Tigris; the one on the right, through Assyria and across the Euphrates."[4] Harran's importance was that not only did it lay directly on the first path, the Assyrian road, but had easy access to the second, or Babylonian road. Harran was on the road north to the Euphrates as well, and thus provided an easy access to Malatiyah and Asia Minor.

Harran seems to have had a special political and military relationship to the Assyrian kings, who had recognized its strategic importance. The annals of the Assyrian King Adad-Nirari I (c. 1307–1275 B.C.E.) report that he conquered the "fortress of Kharani", and annexed it as a province.[5] Not only does it appear in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser I (1115–1077 B.C.E.), who was pleased with the abundance of elephants in the region for hunting and who had a fortress there, but a l0th century inscription reveals that Harran shared with Ashur the privilege of certain types of fiscal exemption and freedom from some forms of military obligation.

The city's status is further attested to by the fact that in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E., its commander was the *turtan*, the highest military commander of the Assyrian empire, and held the title of *limmu*, the eponym of the year, next in sequence after the king himself.[6] Even its transgressions seem to have been lightly punished, for is recorded that Sargon (721–705 B.C.E.) restored the privileges of the "free city of Harran," which had been lost at the time of rebellion. The recapture of the city is described in 2 Kings:

> Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, destroying them utterly. And shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations which my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar.[7]

---

[4] Ammianus Marcellinus, *R.G.*, XXIII.3.1
[5] S. Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts* (London, 1924), 39.
[6] Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts*, 39.
[7] 2 Kings 19:12; repeated in Isaiah, 37:12.

The political prominence of Harran in the Assyrian period was due in large measure to its protecting deity, Sin, the god of the Moon, and giver of oracles, guardian of treaties whose eye sees and knows all; and the temple of the Moon god, called Eḥulḥul (Sumerian: "Temple of Rejoicing") at Harran was restored several times during the first millennium B.C.E., sometimes as an act of political piety, sometimes as an act of personal devotion to the god. The first on record to do so was Shalmaneser III (859–824 B.C.E.); Ashurbanipal, too, (668–627 B.C.E.), the last great sovereign of Assyria, who had installled his younger brother as high priest of Sin, added to the glory of the Moon god through a restoration of his temple; Sin and his consort Ningal showed their gratitude toward the king whom "in the fidelity of their heart they crowned with the lordly tiara;"[8] and finally, Nabonidus (555–539 B.C.E.), the last king of Babylon, following a remarkable dream, had been moved to rebuild the great temple in 553 B.C.E.:

> At midnight he made me have a dream and said (in the dream) as follows: Rebuild speedily Eḥulḥul, the temple of Sin in Harran, and I will hand over to you all the countries.[9]

The temple had stood in need of restoration since its destruction by a force of Babylonians and Medes who besieged the city in 610 B.C.E. in their pursuit of the Assyrian king Ashur-Uballit II who had taken refuge there with what remained of his army.[10] Nabonidus' act had been one both of political ambition and filial regard: his mother, Adad-Guppi, a priestess of the Moon god, had witnessed the sack of Harran by the Medes when

> Sin, king of all gods, became angry with his city and his temple, and went up to heaven, and the city and the people in it became desolate.[11]

But the oracular dream of Nabonidus proved false, for his generosity toward the god did little good in the end; although the temple was restored and rededicated to "Sin, the king of the gods, and greatest of the gods and the goddesses," the last remnants of Nabonidus'

---

[8] Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts*, 40.

[9] *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (ANET), ed. J. Pritchard (Princeton, 1969), 562–563.

[10] D.J. Wiseman, *Chronicles Concerning Chaldaean Kings* (London, 1956), 60 ff.

[11] ANET, 560–62.

empire fell shortly thereafter to the army of Cyrus.[12] But the power of the Moon god long survived the collapse of the power of Babylon.

Harranian Religion

Introduction

Although it is, of course, obligatory in an examination of Harranian religion from its beginnings to the coming of the Muslims to take into account the historical processes of syncretism and synthesis that were operating throughout the Near East, it is also necessary to keep in mind both the essential conservatism and the particularity of religious belief. Even as we categorize functions and forms of divinity and thus attempt to establish universals, we must also pay close attention to historical, political, social and even geographical context.

We must recognize at the outset, however, that such a discussion is complicated by the unevenness of available evidence. Almost all our sources for Harranian religion during the earliest period, prior to the Achaemenid conquest, refer exclusively to the Moon god; it is not until the third century C.E. that other deities and cults are specifically referred to at Harran. Thus, extrapolation from these later sources of evidence for the persistence of cult is difficult and must be undertaken with a great deal of caution. In addition, despite the availability of a great variety of sources, it is ultimately impossible to reconstruct a coherent overview of Mesopotamian religion over nearly three millennia; and, in fact, it may be argued that such an overarching system of religious belief never existed in Mesopotamian culture, given the particularity of ritual and the varied functions of individual deities. Although some imagery and symbol may be universal, interpretation of their meaning is often a product of time and place.

The extent to which both religious ritual and doctrine are the products of localized traditions, and to what degree that particularity is persistent, may be demonstrated by a consideration of that god who is most closely associated with Harran from its earliest history down to the time of the Muslim conquest. Every ancient Mesopotamian city had particular divinities that it elevated above all others,

---

[12] ANET, 562–563.

even while it acknowledged and worshipped the power of other gods. In every ancient source that deals with Harran, beginning in the early second millennium B.C.E., the deity who occupied that supreme position was Sin, the Moon god and Lord of the city. It was the multiform powers of this god that were, 2500 years after the founding of Harran, to provide one of the strongest links between the Muslims and the pre-Islamic culture of the ancient Near East.

The Moon God

No one who has seen it can dismiss the power of the evening sky of Mesopotamia; the planets and innumerable stars hover above the dark earth, forming a protective covering that envelops, horizon to horizon, every part of the human world. Looking up at that embracing illumination of the night, one can easily recognize the comfort and reassurance which its inhabitants once found in the surety of the fixed stars, in the predictability of the wandering planets, in the gentle and yet powerful majesty of the night. And guarding over all of this is the Moon, who sails across the sky in his crescent-shaped boat,[13] and whose purpose it is to rule over the evening light, to measure time, to act as the eye of the gods, to serve as the tablet upon which their divine decrees are inscribed.

Although the divine order encompasses every aspect of nature and culture, the construction of this order among the Semitic inhabitants of Northern Mesopotamia seems to have taken as its most important paradigm the visible heavens; the numinous will, which reveals itself through the iconography of the celestial bodies, encompasses nature, human culture and the ineffable. The ruler of gods and men is the ruler of the sky, and his celestial and terrestrial majesty is made manifest further through the various spheres of the heavens that are the dominions of individual members of the divine family.

The light of the moon stands in contrast to that of the sun, whose light is often harsh, and whose power can be destructive, cruel and even life-threatening. The sun is always the same: it rules the heaven during the day and is never diminished in a strength which seems to be implacable, and it is only after the sun has disappeared that

---

[13] "The Journey of Nanna to Nippur," in S.N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia, 1961), 48.

relief is gained from the oppressive heat of the day. It is for this reason that, although it plays an important role in Mesopotamian cosmology, the sun is clearly subordinated to the moon: in the *Enuma Elish*, the moon is created before the sun, while in the Sumerian astral triad, the Evening Star and Utu, the Sun god, are both the children of Nanna, the Moon.[14]

Of all the bodies in the evening heaven, the changes in shape and position of the moon are the easiest to observe and chart; it is ever-changing, and yet unchanging; it grows, it disappears and is reborn each month, in a never-ending cycle; and as such, it becomes the symbol of every kind of continuity and renewal. It is the symbol of change within nature and within the life of man, but it is not the abrupt change of catastrophe; rather, the moon represents the regularity of change, and through its cycles, it enables man to recognize and accept his own inherent condition. The moon thus is not merely the heavenly representation of the cycles of vegetative and human life; the waxing and waning of the moon is a metaphor for the circularity of change, of time measured against eternity, of light into darkness and life into death and back again.

The magical power of the moon lies in its limitless ability to recreate itself, "a fruit self-grown;"[15] and this power becomes the key to understanding both time and timelessness. The moon is the organizer of time: it fixes the length of days and months. The Moon god is called the "Lord of the month"[16] and "the 30th day is his day,"[17] but he is also a symbol of eternity. The man in the moon is seen not merely because human features can be discerned, but because the moon, more than any other of the heavenly bodies, is alive; he comes to life, he grows, and then begins to disappear from the visible heavens, only to be recreated anew.

The Moon god's Sumerian name is Nanna, but in the hymns, prayers and treaties recorded in the cuneiform texts, he is also known by a variety of other titles which seem in their original meanings to signify the various phases of the moon, each of which is an embodiment of an aspect of his power. Nanna seems to denote the

---

[14] Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, 41.

[15] A. Sjoberg, *Der Mondgott Nanna-Suen in der sumerischen Uberlieferung* I Teil: Texte (Stockholm, 1960), 167.

[16] *Ur Excavation Texts* I, no. 300 (London, 1928).

[17] ANET, 386.

moon in its fullness; its appearance as the crescent is denoted through the title En-Zu or Su-En, which, having been contracted to Sin, became the name by which he was known to the later Semitic inhabitants of Mesopotamia.[18]

The Moon God as Fertility Deity

Yet another illustration of the extension of function from one realm of nature to another is illustrated by the Moon god's associations with herds, for he becomes the shepherd of the stars or celestial "sheep" who come within the halo of his illumination; he is the herdsman who superintends his herds of stars as he sails across the evening sky.[19] A strong connection has been noted between the pastoral cultures in Mesopotamia and astral deities: Nanna, the moon; Utu, the sun; Inanna, the morning and evening star; and An, the sky, all of whom take forms that are especially meaningful to the herdsman.[20] Devotion to Nanna was especially prominent among the Sumerian cities of the lower Euphrates—Ur, Gesh, Larsa and Kullab—where herding played a large role in the economic life of the region. In the tale of Nanna's journey to Nippur, the god tells the gatekeeper of Enlil's temple that he has come in his boat to feed the herds and flocks and to make them multiply. Enlil, in turn, entertains his son with cakes and beer, and gives him gifts of fish, grain, reeds and plants to take back to Ur.

The masculine gender of the moon in Mesopotamian cultures allows the establishment of a connection between the deity's dual functions in both the worlds of nature and human experience, for the Moon god serves as a divine bridge between male fertility and male political power. The most frequent iconographic representation of the moon is the lunar crescent, which is linked to the sphere of masculine sexuality by its further transformation into the horns of the bull, a universal symbol of male generative power; it is this animal that is most frequently sacrificed to the Moon god. His Sumerian title of En-Su designates him as "Lord Wild Bull," whose horns are mirrored in the crescent of the moon.

---

[18] T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), 121.

[19] T. Jacobsen, *Toward an Image of Tammuz*, ed. W.L. Moran (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 25.

[20] Jacobsen, *Toward an Image of Tammuz*, 25.

> Father Nanna, lord of the shining crown, hero of the gods
> Father Nanna, who is grandly perfected in kingship, hero of the gods,
> Father Nanna, who solemnly advances in garments of princeliness, hero of the gods,
> Ferocious bull, whose horn is thick, whose legs are perfected, who is bearded in lapis, and filled with luxury and abundance.[21]

The raging strength of the bull is then associated with male physical power, which extends itself into the political; the crescent shape becomes the royal crown. The persistence of such imagery is demonstrated by a Hellenistic temple at Palmyra, for example, where the ruling god is accompanied by the sun (Yarhibol) and the moon (Aglibol), the latter represented with a halo and the horns of the moon.[22] The reports of the Assyrian astrologers reveal that among the heavenly bodies, the moon was the chief source from which omens were derived, and the horns of the crescent moon and their relationship to the other astral bodies seem to be an especially important source of political omens. "When at the moon's appearance its horns point away from another, there will be an overthrowing of fortresses and downfall of garrisons. There will be obedience and good will in the land."[23]

Despite the clearly masculine character of the moon deity in myth, there seems to be evidence for a feminine aspect of the moon in Mesopotamia which manifests itself only in the full moon. Those cultures which traditionally have seen the moon as feminine in gender have connected its cycles with those of female fertility: the moon's appearance of growing fullness is a manifestation of woman's fecundity. If the crescent of the moon is the symbol of male virility and sexual power, the full moon may be seen to portray the gravidity of a woman about to give birth; thus, within the moon's periodic nature there is a constant cycle of alternation between male and female. The moon is born and dies in its masculine form, but it is as female that it reaches its fullness. It has been suggested that the iconography of horned goddesses, such as the Egyptian Hathor and Isis and perhaps even the Greek Io, may in fact represent this duality of sexual natures. The conclusion of the hymn cited just above would seem to support such an interpretation:

---

[21] ANET, 385.

[22] H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra* (Leiden, 1976), 10.

[23] R.C. Thompson, *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers in the British Museum* (London, 1900), 2.

fruit, created of itself, grown to full size,
good to look at, with whose beauty one is never sated;
womb, giving birth to all, who has settled down in a holy abode.

Nevertheless, in the Mesopotamian pantheon, the consort of Sin, Ningal (Akkadian: great lady), is the most clearly formulated female aspect of the moon, although the mythology concerning her defines her role primarily in political terms, i.e., as the wife of the Moon god. On the stele of Ur-Nammu (2112–2095 B.C.E.), she is portrayed sitting next to her spouse as he confers the regalia of power to the king. It is at Harran, where Sin's political strength is centered, that she is most closely linked to the moon as his spouse. The Harran stele of Adad-Guppi, mother of Nabonidus, records an invocation to Sin, Ningal, Nusku and Sadarnunna;[24] letters from the Sargonid period invoke the blessing of Sin and Ningal;[25] and in a treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria (753–746 B.C.E.) and Mati'ilu of Arpad, Sin of Harran and Ningal are together called upon as witnesses.[26]

In cities other than Harran, however, Ningal is a goddess of the reed marshes, who has no particular connection with the Moon god. Although Greek and Roman authors, as well as later Arabic sources often give the deity a feminine gender in references to the cult of the moon at Harran, such references probably represents a cultural blind spot, rather than the reality of the female aspect of the Harranian god. Herodian reports that Caracalla was on his way back from the temple of Selene when he was assassinated,[27] and Ammianus Marcellinus maintains that it was to Luna that Julian offered his prayers, adding that the moon was especially venerated in that region;[28] whether the female gender is one imposed by the authors' own perception of the moon's gender, or whether the presence of a lunar goddess at Harran is a borrowing from the Greco-Syrian pantheon cannot be determined. It has been suggested, however, that there were at least three moon temples, including two outside the city itself, one of which may have in fact been devoted to a female deity. At Asagi Yarimca, a village four miles north of Harran, a stele

---

[24] ANET, 560–562.
[25] E. Combe, *Histoire du Culte de Sin en Babylonie et en Assyrie* (Paris, 1908), 58.
[26] ANET, 532–53.
[27] Herodian, *Historiae*, IV.13.
[28] "quae religiose per eos colitur tractus." *Res Gestae*, XXIII.3.2.

with the disc and crescent emblem of the Moon god and a cuneiform inscription was discovered in 1949, and Lloyd argued that this was the location of "Selene's" temple.[29]

The fourth century author of the *Historia Augusta*, in his account of the assassination of Caracalla on his return from the temple of the Moon god outside Harran, was perhaps more precise, however, in calling the Harranian deity Lunus. His comment that

> All the learned, but particularly the inhabitants of Carrhae, hold that those who think that the deity ought to be called Luna, with the name and the sex of a woman, are subject to women and always their slaves; but those who believe that the deity is male never suffer the ambushes of women. Hence the Greeks, and also the Egyptians, although they speak of Luna as a god, in the same way that women are included in "Man," nevertheless in their mysteries, use the name Lunus.[30]

may reflect Harranian recognition of the bisexual nature of the moon. It is possible, however, that such an interpretation reflects a different sensibility altogether.

We must remember that several millennia separate the anonymous author of the hymn to Nanna and our late antique commentators. When Plutarch, for example, says of the Egyptians that they take the moon as the mother of the world and ascribe to it an hermaphroditic nature, since it is impregnated by the sun and becomes pregnant and then by itself sends generated matter in the air and scatters it here and there, we must take into account the Greek author's own religious or philosophical biases.[31] Similarly, when Ephrem, a Syrian Christian contemporary of Ammianus Marcellinus, reports that the second century C.E. Edessan philosopher Bar Daysan "looked at the Sun and the Moon; with the Sun he compared the Father, with the Moon the Mother," this may reflect the influence of astrological doctrine upon Bar Daysan's rather eclectic teachings.[32]

---

[29] S. Llloyd and W. Brice, "Harran," *Anatolian Studies* I (1951), 80.

[30] Historia Augusta, *Caracalla*, VII.3–5.

[31] Plutarch, *de Iside*, 43.

[32] Ephraem Syrus, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses*, CSCO 169–170, edited by E. Beck (Louvain, 1957), lv, 10.

Fertility and the Underworld

Whatever the role of a feminine lunar deity in Mesopotamian pantheon, the Moon god's monthly disappearance and return from the netherworld was consistently linked with cycles of fertility; and, as with all deities who enter the underworld, his rebirth into the world of light brings about renewed fertility.

In the Sumerian myth of the birth of the moon, Enlil, the chief god of Nippur, having raped the goddess Ninlil, was banished to the netherworld. But the forlorn goddess, pregnant with the Moon god, followed him there, and would have given birth to Nanna in the netherworld had not Enlil, by some magical means, first caused her to give birth to three deities of the netherworld (including Nergal, ruler of the dead), thus enabling the Moon god to ascend to heaven.[33] The Babylonian legend of the descent of Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven, into the nether world in order to rescue the vegetation god, Tammuz, perhaps has its roots in this Sumerian account of the birth of the moon, thus elucidating the elements of fertility in the myth of the Moon god's birth.[34] The moon as male fertility deity follows a pattern common to the consorts of the earth goddess: death or capture, descent into the underworld and rescue or release. In the Tammuz liturgies of a later period, Ishtar and Tammuz are often given the titles of Ninlil and Enlil, the parents of Nanna, which adds further support to his role as a god of fertility.[35]

But while the link between the lunar cycles and fertility and sexuality, whether human or of the world of nature, plays an obviously important role in Mesopotamian myth and ritual, that is not the only interpretation found of the moon's monthly disappearance. In Babylon, the day of the full moon was a sabbath (*shappattum*), when special prayers were made to appease the assembly of the gods, because the beginning of the moon's decline might signify the displeasure of the gods. The 28th of the month was a day of lamentation when prayers of penitence were offered, because the moon had disappeared from view and was to remain hidden for a few days in the power of the dragon. The god of the underworld and the god of light seem to exist on a continuum that extends from life into death and

---

[33] T. Jakobsen, *The Harps That Once . . .: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven, 1987), 169.

[34] ANET, 106–109.

[35] S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (London, 1963), 25.

back into life again. Sumerian and Babylonian myths repeatedly link the Moon god with the netherworld and the abode of the dead.

Nergal, the ruler of the dead, is also a son of Enlil, and therefore the brother of Sin, and perhaps even his twin.[36] Further evidence of the close relationship between the two is found in the Mesopotamian calendar. In the Assyrian period, Nergal was linked to the planet Saturn, whose special month is Kislev (November–December), while the month of Siwan (May–June) was dedicated to the Moon god.[37] Thus, one is asssociated with the winter solstice, the other with the summer solstice.

One of the most important festivals in Mesopotamian religion was the *akitu* festival, which eventually came to be viewed as a New Year's festival, although its origins are obscure. Each city god seems to have had his or her own *akitu* festival, and at varying times of the year, perhaps commemorating a particular event in the god's cycle of myth. The festival at Babylon in honor of Marduk took place in the month of Nisan, the first month of the year, when it may have marked the victory of Marduk over the forces of evil embodied in Tiamat at the beginning of creation. According to the hemerologies found in the library of Ashurbanipal, there was an *akitu* festival celebrated at Harran in honor of Sin on the 17th of Siwan, which date would approximate the summer solstice.

The *akitu* festival in honor of Sin at Harran also may have served a somewhat parallel but older function. Despite the fact that the festivals of the Babylonian calendar were intimately tied to the agricultural cycle, it must not be forgotten that it was the moon itself which originally formed the basis for the measurement of time. Might it be possible, then, to see in the festival celebrated in Siwan a recreation of the struggle between the two brothers as the forces of light and darkness, parallel to the struggle of Marduk to overcome cosmic chaos? Mesopotamian myth presents two seemingly opposing depictions of this fraternal relationship. On that "day of lying down," when the Moon is not visible, he descends of his own free will into the realm of Nergal to make administrative decisions, and to act as

---

[36] see Jacobsen, *Harps*, 169 and H. Lewy, "Points of Comparison Between Zoroastrianism and the Moon-Cult of Harran," *A Locust's Leg*, ed. W.B. Henning (London, 1962), 148.

[37] Nergal is later sometimes associated with Mars. Saturn does make better sense, but see later evidence in the calendar of the *Catalog* of Ibn al-Nadim.

a judge in the netherworld; his work complete, he returns to the upper world, accompanied by the prayers and libations of the Anunnaki.[38] Elsewhere, however, the two brothers seem to be locked in an unending struggle, which began with the birth of the Moon god. Each month Sin is overwhelmed by the forces of darkness and death, but is reborn from the netherworld, victorious once again in the eternal conflict.

The Moon God and the Demonic World

There are also a great many myths that connect the darkness of the moon with the evil and suffering which befall man. Eclipses were interpreted as evil omens: special prayers were offered on the moon's behalf, for they were a sign that Sin had been overpowered by demons. Once Sin, "the luminary of heaven and earth," has vanished from the heavens, evil and chaos have the chance to flourish.[39] Indeed, the motif of the moon struggling continually against the powers of darkness would seem to be central to an understanding of his earliest function in Mesopotamian religion. In a Babylonian tale, seven evil spirits from the netherworld attack the house of Anu and block off the light of the Moon, who is eventually rescued by Marduk. But in the absence of the Moon, the evil spirits (*utukki limnuti*) ravage the earth, causing disease and chaos.

. . .the seven evil gods, the messengers of Anu
the King,
Raising their evil heads went to and fro
through the night,
searching out wickedness,
rushing loose over the land
like the wind from the depths of the heavens;
Bel saw the darkening of the hero Sin in heaven,
and the Lord spoke unto his minister Nusku:
"Oh, my minister Nusku!
Bear my message unto the ocean deep,
Tell unto Ea in the Ocean deep
the tidings of my son Sin,
who in heaven has been grievously bedimmed.
. . .

The darkening thereof is visible throughout the heavens.

---

[38] Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 122.
[39] ANET, 538.

Those seven evil gods, death-dealing without fear.
Those seven evil gods, rushing on like a flood,
Have scoured the land,
Have attacked the land like a storm,
Clustering angrily round the crescent of the moon god,
won over to their aid Shamash the mighty and Adad the warrior.[40]

A parallel to this account may be found in the Babylonian Irra legend.[41] In this tale, Irra, the god of pestilence who was sometimes identified with Nergal, the ruler of the dead, and the leader of the seven evil spirits, having lured Marduk to the underworld, perverts mankind; and when the god returns, he finds his city of Babylon in ruins. Thus, although the elaborate myths describing the struggle between the moon and the forces of darkness and death clearly had their origins in a search for physical causes, they also came to serve as the basis for another perception of the Moon god: a deity who engaged in a struggle between the powers of light and those of darkness, the forces of good and evil. It appears that the seeds of a dualistic view of the cosmos in which the Moon god is one of the major protagonists had been planted in Mesopotamian thought from its beginnings: light and darkness, death and rebirth, male and female.

Although one must remember that many of these poems are the products of sophisticated priestly speculation about the nature of the world and the way in which it operates, the conflict between Nergal and Sin is indicative of an inherent dualism in ancient Mesopotamian religion which will find expression later among such groups as the Mandaeans and other gnostic sects. In its Mesopotamian origins, however, it was a cosmological, rather than ethical, dualism, although at a later period it was reshaped by both a natural evolution and the influence of the much more radical views of Zoroastrianism.

The more immediate expression of the belief in Nergal's power to do harm was a belief in a vast number of demons who influenced every area of life, and whose behavior was marked by irrational purposelessness and random mischief. There were many different kinds of demons, who could cause every type of human ill; and as we see from the poem above, even the gods were not immune from their attacks. Most were nameless, although it may be possible that the

---

[40] From the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh. R.C. Thompson, *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia* I (London, 1903), Tablet 16.
[41] Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 227–28.

Seven may refer to a particular grouping, since many texts emphasize the extent of their power:

Seven gods of the broad heaven
Seven gods of the broad earth
Seven robber gods are they.
Seven gods of night
Seven evil gods
Seven evil demons
Seven evil demons of oppression
Seven in heaven and seven on earth.[42]

Out of this belief arose an extensive body of incantation literature and a variety of apotropaic rituals and charms designed to nullify their power. Although there is no specific textual reference to the power of demons at Harran in this period, we shall able to discern, in both late antiquity and during the Muslim period, the survival of such beliefs.

The "Lamp of Heaven" and Prophecy

An explication of Sin's powers of illumination, which are revealed in a variety of epithets—the lamp of heaven and earth,[43] the luminary of heaven and earth,[44] Marduk who illuminates the night—provides another perspective on the struggle between light and darkness. Illumination is not only the physical light of the moon, but also illumination of the will of the gods, enlightenment, especially through oracles. In a Assyrian prayer to Sin on the occasion of an eclipse, Sin is beseeched to give the oracle of the gods.[45] As such, Sin becomes the Lord of Knowledge, the tablet on which Nabu, the scribe of the gods, "whose Bark of Destiny crosses no river," writes the divine decrees.[46] In the annals of Ashurbanipal, a priest is represented as reading on the disc of the full moon the decrees of Nabu.

Because of this overlap of functions as a giver of oracles, Nabu was closely associated with Sin. His name appears as an element in the

---

[42] Thompson, *Devils and Evil Spirits* I, Tablet V.
[43] ANET, 390.
[44] ANET, 534–541.
[45] ANET, 385.
[46] Thompson, *Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers*, plate V.

names of many neo-Babylonian kings (Nabonidus, Nabopolassar, Nebuchudnezzar); Nabu's clearest connection with the Moon god of Harran in this period may be found in his seeming identification with Nusku, the god of fire, who is one of the deities invoked by both Nabonidus and his mother. The stele of Nabonidus depicts the royal sceptre topped with a wedge symbol commonly associated with Nabu; both H.J.W. Drijvers[47] and C.J. Gadd[48] have argued that at Harran, at least, the two deities are the same.[49]

More generally, Nabu, the city god of Borsippa, is the one most clearly connected with intellectual activity. He is the inventor of writing, the divine scribe, and the patron of all the rational arts. He is the transmitter of the decrees of the gods to mankind, the possessor of the tablets of destiny which fix the length of human life, and the giver of oracles that reveal the cosmic order of existence, and thus he serves as a link between the divine and human worlds. It was Nabu as scribe who recorded the destiny of the coming year at the *akitu* festival. "If you sin against this treaty. . . May Nabu who holds the tablets of fate of the gods, erase your name, and make your descendants disappear from the land."[50]

Since the evidence for Nabu comes primarily from the first millennium B.C.E., his increased prominence may be the result of a more sophisticated and literate culture, but other interpretations are possible: that as the function of Bel-Marduk as cosmocrator made him increasingly remote, Nabu came to serve even more as his intermediary; or Nabu's increased role may merely reflect the more generalized mythic pattern of the overthrow of the father by the son.

The Moon God and the Power of Kings

Within the divine family, Nanna or Sin is the perfect son, the elder brother among the third generation of gods.[51] He is portrayed standing by the side of his father Enlil, the god of the air, and although he is sometimes described as being the conduit through

---

[47] H.J.W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden, 1980), 144.

[48] C.J. Gadd, "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus," *Anatolian Studies* VIII (1958), 35–92.

[49] cf. ANET, 310.

[50] From a vassal treaty of Esarhaddon. ANET, 534–541.

[51] ANET, 556–57.

whom the gifts of his father flows, he also is called in his own right the giver of power and the divine judge; an eighth century B.C.E. judicial text from Harran declares that in case of a violation of contract, the delinquent must burn his eldest son on the altar of Sin and his eldest daughter on the altar of Belit-Seri, who is Venus.[52]

In addition to their functions in the spheres of nature and the wider social structure, many deities of the Sumerian and Assyro-Babylonian pantheons exerted political control, even ownership, over particular cities. The god, in turn, intervened with the other divine powers on behalf of his city: when Nanna wished to guarantee the well-being of Ur, he sailed his gift-laden boat to Nippur to make offerings to Enlil in order to secure the blessing of "the father of the gods."[53] Nevertheless, the Moon god's power among his fellow deities and among men extends beyond his local political function at Ur or Harran, for the importance of the moon cult in these states has its origins in the multiple levels of meaning and function of the divine. The Sumerian Nanna, to whom An and Enlil had turned over its kingship, had been the protector of Ur,[54] and it was most likely this power of the god that caused merchants from Ur to introduce the cult of the Moon god at Harran. Sin was not only the Moon god and guarantor of the political order, he was also the guardian deity and ruler of Ur and later the Lord of Harran, the god to whom these cities appealed and offered their most important prayers.

The political and religious prominence of Harran was seen by its inhabitants as due in large measure to its protecting deity, Sin, the god of the moon, and giver of oracles, guardian of treaties whose eye sees and knows all,[55] and there is considerable evidence that the Moon god had become early on the guarantor of royal political power in Northern Mesopotamia. Calling upon the various gods to curse those who violate its decrees, the law code of Hammurabi prays that

> Sin, the lord of heaven, my divine creator, whose chastening stands conspicuous among the gods, deprive him of the crown (and) throne of sovereignty.[56]

---

[52] Combe, *Culte du Sin*, 61.
[53] S.N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, 47 ff.
[54] ANET, 523–525.
[55] Lloyd, "Harran," 77–111.
[56] ANET, 179.

We have already noted a treaty signed and sealed in the temple of Sin of Harran that was found in the royal archives at Mari, while the 14th century B.C.E. kings of Hatti and the Mitanni sealed their agreement with Sin and Shamash of Harran as witnesses.[57] The special powers of "Sin, the great god who dwells in Harran" was called upon again in the 8th century B.C.E. to guarantee the treaty of Ashurnirari V with Mati'ilu of Arpad:

> (If the Assyrian army) goes to war at the orders of Ashurnirari, king of Assyria, and Mati'ilu, together with his officials, his army, his chariotry, does not leave (on the campaign) in full loyalty, may the great lord Sin who dwells in Harran clothe Mati'ilu, his sons, his officials, and the people of his land in leprosy as in a cloak so that they have to roam the open country, and may he have no mercy on them.[58]

The political power of the deity was extended to his earthly representatives: everywhere we find close ties between the institution of kingship and "Father Nanna, lord of the shining crown,"[59] whose crescent shape was transformed into a mitre, the symbol of the royal crown. On the stele of Ur-Nammu, the god sits enthroned, holding the insignia of power, which he is about to bestow on the king, while his consort, the goddess Ningal, seated beside him, looks on.[60] In the code of Hammurabi, the king is called "the seed of royalty which Sin has created."[61] The god's ability to confer political power and victory is elaborated further in a letter to Ashurbanipal concerning the future king's father, Esarhaddon, who in 675 B.C.E. made a pilgrimage to the temple of Sin at Harran:

> When the father of the king my lord (i.e., Esarhaddon) went to Egypt, he saw in the region of Harran the temple made of cedar. The god, Sin, leaning on a staff, had two crowns on his head. The god Nusku was standing in front of him. The father of the king my lord entered and he (i.e., Nusku) placed (a crown) on his head saying, "You will go and make conquests in several countries." He left and in fact conquered Egypt. Other lands, not yet submissive to Ashur and Sin, the king, lord of kings, will conquer.[62]

---

[57] Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts*, 39.
[58] ANET, 532–533.
[59] ANET, 385.
[60] ANET, 85.
[61] ANET, 164.
[62] ANET, 605–606.

Both Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal received the royal insignia at Harran, perhaps in recognition of the Moon god's divine gift of kingship.

Finally, the sixth century B.C.E. stele from Harran, containing the words of Adad-Guppi, the mother of Nabonidus, last king of Babylon, hails Sin as the king of all gods, who called her son to kingship and "entrusted him with the kingship of Sumer and Akkad, (also of) all the countries from the borders of Egypt, on the Upper Sea, to the Lower Sea."[63] Indeed, the stele of Nabonidus echoes the words of his mother: "For me, Nabonidus, the lonely one who has nobody, in whose (text: my) heart was no thought of kingship, the gods and goddesses prayed (to Sin) and Sin called me to kingship."[64] His Babylonian subjects, resentful over the displacement of Marduk, saw all too clearly the political implications of the king's claim, for after the fall of Nabonidus, a Babylonian text proclaimed that "he used to confound the rites, and upset the ordinances; He would utter a word against the divinely-ordained ruler."[65] It is likely that, whatever Nabonidus' personal feelings about the god might have been, his elevation of the god of Ur and Harran was grounded in his desire to use religion as a unifying force for the disparate peoples under his rule, for the power of the Moon god was already venerated among Arameans and Arabs; it is also possible that Nabonidus may have been trying to shore up his own political prospects by exalting the god so closely connected with kingship.

Gadd and Javier Teixidor have compared the Harranian stelae of Nabonidus with one found at the north Arabian oasis of Taima, where Nabonidus declared he spent time during a ten year period of political instability in Babylon; the king maintained that his subjects had offended the Moon god, "king of the gods, lord of lords of the gods and goddesses," by rebellion, and were punished with fever and famine.[66] The Taima stele, in Aramaic and probably dating to the fifth century B.C.E. presents us with a pantheon that "unfortunately... eludes us,"[67] but both Teixidor and Drijvers have suggested that one of the divine names on the stele may

---

[63] ANET, 560–562.
[64] ANET, 562–63.
[65] Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts*, 87.
[66] J. Gadd, "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus," 59.
[67] J. Teixidor, *The Pagan God* (Princeton, 1977), 71 ff. Teixidor does suggest that a date contemporary with Nabonidus is possible.

represent the Moon god, and that the choice of Taima by Nabonidus as a royal residence may have been influenced by an indigenous worship of the deity, which the king then overlaid with the cult of the Moon god of Harran. Given the fierce political rivalries among the various cities of Mesopotamia throughout their pre-Achaemenid history, it is plausible to surmise that the cults of the various deities in particular cities would emphasize the special sphere of activity of the god. Thus, the cult of the Moon god at Ur and later in Harran and in whatever other city that he had chosen to protect and make his own would emphasize the power already granted him among the gods and tend to elevate his position in the divine hierarchy as much as possible.

Therefore, when we consider the cult of the Moon god at Harran, we must take into account the general political importance of the deity within the divine hierarchy (at least during the Babylonian-Assyrian period), and then distinguish between those powers ascribed to him because of his lordship over the city, those accorded him for particular historical reasons, and those normally accorded to a male lunar deity. For example, the dream instructing Nabonidus to rebuild the temple of the Moon god at Harran calls upon Sin as "the lamp of heaven and earth."[68] This is a perfectly obvious epithet for a Moon god, but when he is called "king of all the gods, the lord of the gods of heaven and the nether world," that must be taken as political propaganda on the part of Nabonidus. The offering of Nabonidus' mother must be considered in a similar light:

> "I am Adad-Guppi, the mother of Nabonidus, king of Babylon, a devotee of Sin, Ningal, Nusku and Sadarnunna... I who have laid hold of the hem of the garment of Sin, the king of all the gods. . . Whoever you are, take refuge with the great godhead of Sin, the king of all gods, the lord of the gods of heaven and the nether world."[69]

But it was Sin, "king of the gods," who had called Nabonidus to the kingship and given him his dominions, and Nabonidus' attempts to elevate the importance of the cult of Sin at Harran demonstrate his recognition of the political claims that could be made in the name of the god; although the great temple had been restored twice before, the restoration of the greatness of Sin through the rebuilding of his

---

[68] ANET, 562–563.
[69] ANET, 560–562.

temple at Harran was joined, in the case of Nabonidus, to the restoration of the endangered Babylonian empire. Just as Marduk's victory over Tiamat in the Babylonian version of the *Enuma Elish* had strengthened Babylon's claims to political supremacy because Marduk regarded that city as his own domain, while an Assyrian copy of the poem replaces Marduk with Ashur, so the oaths which were sworn to the god at Harran must be seen as fulfilling a similar function, for the enhancement of the god's power served both the god and the city well.

In this manner, the various functions and realms of the god may be seen to enhance one another, and the fact that oaths are sworn in the name of the Moon god at Harran may be a consequence of both the political and the functional. Thus, as the eye that sees all, he is the witness to oaths, but he is also the powerful god who is the protector of the city and its ruler. It has been suggested that it was for this latter reason, that of political benefaction, that the Arab rulers of the region around Harran made dedicatory inscriptions to Sin at Sumatar Harabesi in the second and third centuries C.E.[70]

Although the civic functions of the Moon god were necessarily diminished with the political decline, after the Persian conquest, of those Near Eastern cities which claimed his lordship, nevertheless the remembrance of divine protectorship of the city seemed to have persisted long after the collapse of his political status, for it is reported by Ibn al-Nadim that the Harranians of the medieval period continued to pray to their god for "the restoration to them of their empire and the days of their domination." Ultimately, however, in order for a divinity to survive the declining political fortunes of a particular town or people with which he has been linked, either that which is non-political in his character must take on greater importance, or he must take on new functions which in the end may eclipse his previous political role.

This was the case of the Moon god of Harran after the defeat of Nabonidus by Cyrus and the collapse of the Babylonian-Assyrian Empire, for not only was there the reinvigoration of the most ancient aspects of the role of the moon at Harran but also the development of new perceptions and functions of "the lamp of heaven" as a result of cultural contact with a multitude of other symbolic universes,

---

[70] H.J.W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 142.

most notably Persian and Hellenistic Greek. In order to trace the patterns of reinterpretation of the meaning of the moon, it is necessary to focus on what most likely are its earliest non-political functions in Sumerian and later Mesopotamian world views, for it was these roles which enabled the power of the god to endure.

The Moon, Astral Religion and Astrology in Mesopotamia

The most obvious impetus to the belief in the power of the heavenly bodies was the observation of their movements, and thus, in its very origins it is impossible to separate astronomy from astrology. The beginnings of astronomy can be found in the simplest recognition of the rising and setting of the sun and moon, and of the various changes which occurred over time, especially in their relationship to the seasonal patterns of nature. Although the sun so dominated the sky that it suppressed the illuminating power of the other heavenly bodies, the Moon, Lord of the evening sky, ruled over a vast celestial assembly; and from a very early time, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia observed the patterns of the evening sky, rather than the movement of the sun.

The planets were seen to move across the heavens with an unceasing and inexorable regularity that seemed to demonstrate the power of whatever force ruled over the heavens; and perhaps because they felt the need to find in their terrestrial existence the same stability manifest in the heavens, and to situate themselves within the observable patterns of nature as well as to find a place for themselves in relation to that celestial world, those skilled in the geography of the heavens attempted to discover the connection between earthly and heavenly events. The Sumerians, and later Assyrians and Babylonians, constructed ziggurats, their forms reflecting a belief in the unity of the cosmos, from which they might observe the heavens; that at Borsippa had seven sections, each one tinted to represent the ruling planet. In this search, the planets became the interpreters, whose movements and relationships among themselves seemed to make manifest the will and purposes of those who ruled them.

Nevertheless, we must be careful to note that the connection between the planets as manifestations of divine power and ancient Mesopotamian religion in general is difficult to determine. The extent to which the actual practice of Mesopotamian religion was rooted in the worship of the heavenly bodies has been perhaps over-

emphasized. First of all, it is to be noted that much of the religious ritual of everyday life not unexpectedly centered on the life processes, most notably the fertility of the earth and the animal world, and that the deities associated with those functions have little to do with a celestial theology. Secondly, as we have already seen, the Mesopotamian spiritual world contained an extraordinary number of demons, whose power was much more immediately apparent than that of the gods who ruled the heavens. Finally, an absolute distinction must be made between such celestial deities and the development of a predictive astrology, which has long been associated with Mesopotamia.

Beginning with the Ionian Greeks and continuing up through the present century, much nonsense has been promulgated concerning the antiquity of the "Chaldaean science" of astronomy. Otto Neugebauer has written, "there is scarcely another chapter in the history of science where an equally deep gap exists between the generally accepted description of a period and the results which have slowly emerged from a detailed investigation of the source material."[71] Neugebauer's words, written more than 30 years ago, still hold true today when we look at what has been asserted about the pre-Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic beliefs of Harran and their connection to astral doctrine.

Although we shall see the identification of several of the deities worshipped at Harran with various of the planets, it is clear that at least some of these connections will turn out to have been posited late in the sacred history of Mesopotamia, and that some of the most important Mesopotamian gods, such as Enlil, were never associated with any planet. In addition, it is equally clear that such identifications of divine power with the the planets fluctuated over time; overall, it would certainly be incorrect to categorize Mesopotamian religion as primarily celestial in focus. Through a careful consideration of the cuneiform astronomical texts, Neugebauer and others have demonstrated that the image of the Chaldaean priesthood as the source of ancient astral lore and wisdom was in large measure a product of the diffusion of Greak ideology in the Near East, since it was not until the beginning of the Seleucid era that there had developed a mathematical astronomy of sufficient sophistication to allow

---

[71] O. Neugebauer, *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity* (New York, 1957), 97.

the calculation of the elaborate horoscopes which formed the basis of Hellenistic astrology. It was during this same relatively late period as well that that astrological staple, the zodiac, was "invented."[72]

Although there are records of observation of the appearance and disappearance of the planet Venus as early as the seventeenth century B.C.E. (during the reign of Ammisaduqa at Babylon), prior to the eighth century B.C.E., the only clearly demonstrable scientific interest in charting the "wandering stars" is found focused on the moon and the sun; and, in fact, it was only beginning with the reign of Nabonassar (747 B.C.E.) that accurate records of eclipses were kept and that the reports of the court astronomers were regularly recorded.[73] Certainly the importance of the moon in the interpretation of various celestial *omina* (including the meteorological) had developed quite early in Mesopotamia, but by the very nature of the lunar cycle, these forecasts could not be long-range.

In any event, divination through celestial phenomena was just one aspect of prophecy; much more popular during the Babylonian and Assyrian periods were incubation and haruspicy. Even that royal champion of the Moon god, the sixth century B.C.E. Nabonidus, was commanded to restore the temple of the Moon god at Harran through a dream. Further support for this view is found in the seventh century B.C.E. copies of the collection of celestial omens known as the *Enuma Anu Enlil*, which is dated in its earliest form to around 1000 B.C.E., and probably contains even earlier material. Most of its contents may be considered to be descriptive rather than analytical; only one quarter of the omens may be regarded as "astrological," i.e., specifically concerned with the stars and planets.[74] Yet, within two hundred years of Nabonassar, a shift in interest may be observed, for a cuneiform tablet dated 523 B.C.E. indicates the ability to calculate the monthly *ephemerides* of the sun and moon, the conjunctions of the moon with the planets, and of the planets with each other, and eclipses.

Despite these relatively rapid advances, however, Neugebauer has posited a date no earlier than the fifth century B.C.E. for the

---

[72] F. Rochberg-Halton, "New Evidence for the History of Astrology," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43 (1984), 115 ff., argues for a 5th century date, although he suggests that its function was astronomical computation, not divination.

[73] see R.C. Thompson, *Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers*.

[74] O.R. Gurney, "The Babylonians and Hittites," *Oracles and Divinations*, ed. M. Loewe and C. Blacker (Boulder, 1981), 159.

regularization of the solar-lunar intercalated calendar, which knowledge would be necessary for the development of a genethialogical astrology. It was Naburimanni, a "descendant of the priest of the Moon god," who early in that century devised the lunar computational tables, used to determine the true date of the full moon, by which at least lunar eclipses might be predicted. It has been suggested that the growing interest in the astral deities and astral prophecy in the Near East during this period was a direct consequence of the conquest of Mesopotamia by the Persians, whose own religion contained many astral elements. We shall shortly consider whether that claim is true.

CHAPTER TWO

HARRANIAN RELIGION FROM ALEXANDER TO THE MUSLIM CONQUEST

Historical Backgrounds: 539 B.C.E. – 640 C.E.

Alexander the Great and the Seleucids

Persian rule of Mesopotamia, which began with Cyrus in the sixth century, continued until the arrival of Alexander in 331 B.C.E., but Harran is not mentioned in our available sources at any time during that interval. Although it is doubtful whether Alexander himself ever came to Harran, a Macedonian military colony was stationed on the ancient site, now transcribed as Karran, by its Seleucid rulers. It was here that Eumenes, Alexander's secretary, spent the winter of 318 B.C.E., vainly scheming for the reunification of the dead conqueror's empire; Diodorus Siculus reports that Seleucus, in his attempt to make himself master of Babylon, came to the city in 312 B.C.E., where he persuaded some and compelled others of the Greeks who had been settled there to join his forces.[1]

To the north was the city that would become Harran's bitter rival in late antiquity, Edessa, built first, according to later Christian tradition, by Nimrod as Orhay, but at least refounded by Seleucus Nicator in 303 B.C.E. and named after the old Macedonian capital, although it was also called for a time Antioch on the Callirhoe. Edessa's role was to serve as a Greek bulwark of the Seleucid kingdom in the Near East, and although Seleucid political domination of the region began to erode by the early 2nd century B.C.E. with the coming of the Parthians, Edessa remained an outpost of Hellenic culture and learning in Northern Mesopotamia to the end of antiquity; and as a center of political and military activity in the Graeco-Roman period, its importance easily eclipsed that of its older neighbor to the south, Harran.

In fact, the increasing importance of Edessa in the Hellenistic,

---

[1] Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheke*, XIX.91.

Roman and Byzantine eras complicates any attempt to reconstruct the history of Harran after the coming of the Greeks, for although the former's well-established prominence in the political, cultural and religious life of the region guaranteed it a place in a great variety of contemporary accounts, Harran seems no longer able to make such claims. Periodically, but at no regular intervals, we may find references to the city, but her history often can be reconstructed only through the more general history of Northern Mesopotamia or the remarkable chronicles of Edessa, composed for the most part in the medieval period. The problem, as we shall see, is especially acute after the reign of Julian, and the collapse of organized pagan resistance to Christianity. Nevertheless, the cautious use of these sources makes it possible, at the least, to construct a frame of reference by which we might investigate the history of Harran during this period.

Parthians and Arabs

The Seleucid Greeks managed to keep an at least tenuous hold on the area until the destruction of the army of Antiochus Sidetes in 129 B.C.E. by the Parthians brought an effective end to Greek hegemony in the region; the political vacuum was filled in a variety of imaginative ways by the Parthians, who had arisen out of the ruins of the Achaemenid empire in the mid-third century B.C.E. and quickly overran the Greek states of the Far East, establishing an empire whose boundaries encompassed Semites, Iranians and Greeks. The true founder of the Parthian empire, Mithridates I (171–138 B.C.E.), wholeheartedly embraced the inheritance of both the Seleucid and Achaemenid domains, for he designated himself as both *philhellenos* and "the Great King."

Culturally and religiously tolerant, the Parthians adopted Greek as their official language, although they employed the *lingua franca*, Aramaic, in Mesopotamia. More often exercising their dominion through alliances with independent kingdoms that had gained autonomy after the collapse of Seleucid power, the Parthians were, by and large, content to leave things as they were. But not always: in the early years of his reign, Mithridates II (123–87 B.C.E.) took direct control of Mesopotamia, and in 94 B.C.E. annexed the regions around Adiabene, Gordyene and Osrhoene, the last including Edessa and Harran. Nevertheless, despite the imperial

ambitions of a Mithridates and the Parthians' clear military dominance, the real political power in Northern Mesopotamia more often seems to have been in the hands of local dynasties. Semi-nomadic Arab tribes had begun to infiltrate into the region in the fourth century B.C.E., and perhaps even before, establishing themselves as rulers of an independent kingdom at Edessa shortly before the defeat of Sidetes.

Mithridates' hold on his conquests began to slip toward the end of his reign, and shortly before his death, the client kingdom of Armenia rebelled. With the encouragement of his father-in-law Mithridates VI of Pontus, Tigranes, who had been placed on the Armenian throne by the Parthians, seized Northern Mesopotamia and donned the royal Persian mantle, calling himself "King of Kings." The Romans, anxious over the changing political configurations, decided that this would be the ideal moment to intervene in the affairs of Asia. Beginning with Sulla, successive Roman generals were given the command of holding in check the expansionist goals of Armenia and Pontus, but it was not until Pompey's expedition in 66 B.C.E. that they achieved total victory. The Romans made Pontus a province and concluded protective alliances with Armenia and a number of the minor kingdoms, including Edessa and Commagene, on the Parthian frontier.

The political status of Harran from the time of the entrance of the Parthians into western Asia through the period of the Roman advance is uncertain; it has been suggested that the city was under the control of Edessa,[2] but there is no clear evidence to support the claim. According to Pliny, Harran lay in the region of Arabia,[3] and it is likely that local tribal dynasties held sway there as well as at Edessa, where after the establishment of a monarchy in 132 B.C.E., we find both Arabic and Aramaic royal names. The settlement of Arabs in the region had been encouraged by the Armenians since the time when Tigranes made Osrhoene part of his imperial plans.

The Arabs were given control of the trade routes that passed through these cities, a move that has been characterized as little more than tariffs and acknowledgement of the right to practice extortion. The establishment in the early first century B.C.E. of a

---

[2] See A. Mez, *Geschichte der Stadt Harran in Mesopotamia bis zum Einfall der Araber*, 37 ff.

[3] Pliny, *N.H.*, V.xx.86.

second Armenian capital, Tigranocerta, which lay south of Harran and Edessa, as well as the growing commercial power of Palmyra must have contributed to Harran's gradual economic decline that seems to have set in around this time.[4]

Harran in the Roman Period (65 B.C.E. –363 C.E.)

Although Dio Cassius reports that the Roman general Afranius who served under Pompey was rescued by "Macedonian colonists" from Harran after he lost his way on his return to Syria in 65–64 B.C.E.,[5] Harran's Roman associations in the subsequent history of the area were not happy ones. It was near Harran, now called Carrhae by the Romans, that Crassus and his army were annihilated by the Parthians in 53 B.C.E. Ironically, it is reported by Plutarch that it was the phylarch or shaykh of Edessa (called by Plutarch Ariamnes, but whose dates correspond to King Abgar II) who delivered the unsuspecting Crassus and his troops into the hands of the Parthian commander Surena;[6] yet, it was Harran that forever bore the odium of being the site of one of the worst Roman military disasters.

Crassus and a few hundred of his followers took refuge in Harran after the debacle; a certain man of Carrhae, Andromachus, who had promised to help them slip away, led them instead into an ambush below a hill called Sinnaca.[7] Despite the fact that two "Greeks" from Carrhae attempted to save the life of Crassus' son after the battle,[8] the city was remembered by the Romans as *Carrhas Crassi clade nobiles*.[9] The Roman had long memories: some 350 years later, Ammianus Marcellinus would identify Harran less alliteratively as *Crassorum et Romani exercitus aerumnis insigne*.[10]

Some seventeen years after the ignominy of Carrhae, Mark Antony, persuaded by a dissident Parthian noble that Parthia was about to rise up in rebellion against her king, crossed the Euphrates

---

[4] The exact location of Tigranocerta has been the subject of great debate among modern archaeologists and historians.

[5] Dio Cassius, *Epitome*, XXXVII.5.5.

[6] Plutarch, *Crassus*, XXI.1.

[7] *Crassus*, XXIX.7.

[8] *Crassus*, XV.11.

[9] Pliny, *N.H.*, V.xx.85.

[10] Ammianus Marcellinus, *R.G.*, XXIII.3.1.

with his army. 35,000 of his soldiers perished; and it was not until the reign of Tiberius that Roman armies once again ventured into the region, when a candidate for the Parthian throne, Tiridates III, handpicked by the Romans, challenged the ruling Artabanus in 35 C.E. With the support of the Roman governor of Syria, Lucius Vitellius, the pretender was at first victorious: Artabanus fled, and Tiridates occupied the towns of Mesopotamia, "both of Macedonian and Parthian origin."[11] But in the end, his military indecisiveness gave Artabanus the opportunity to regroup, and Tiridates was forced to flee with a few of his followers to Roman safety in Syria.

Perhaps it was, as Dio Cassius suggested, a "passion for glory" that led the Emperor Trajan to set out for Antioch in 114 C.E. in order to bring the lands east of the Euphrates back once again under Roman imperial control. Although at first Trajan was successful in either winning over or compelling into submission the cities of Mesopotamia, two years later they rose in rebellion, with the active encouragement of the Parthians. His successor was perhaps more realistic, for with the accession of Hadrian in 117 C.E., Rome handed back the conquered territories to their rulers and renounced her claims to the region across the Euphrates. Rome interfered in local politics a bit longer, but when Lucius Verus campaigned in the region in 163–164 C.E., he found Parthian garrisons installed in almost all the cities.

Roman interpretation of the role of Abgar II in the disaster at Harran points to the difficult position in which the independent kingdoms on the frontier between Parthia and Rome found themselves in that era. The freedom of these buffer states depended, in large measure, on Parthian, and then Roman, tolerance. Neither side had any qualms about intervening in the internal politics of these cities; although Abgar was considered by the Romans to have betrayed the army of Crassus, he was himself deposed shortly after by the Parthians, presumably because of his Roman sympathies.

Lucius captured Edessa, Nisibis and Harran. The city's political status during this period is unclear, but the numismatic evidence suggests that Harran surrendered willingly to the Roman army, for not only was it designated as a *colonia*, and at least briefly renamed Aurelia, but its citizens were granted the honorific *philoromaioi*. A

---

[11] Tacitus, *Annales*, VI.38.

coin from the reign of Commodus marks it further with the title of *metropolis*. Further work on puzzling Syriac inscriptions from the "sacred mount" at nearby Sumatar Harabesi and dedicated to the Moon god, as well as those found there in a cave by H. Pognon which date to this period, may some day help to untangle the complex political relationship between Harran and Edessa at this time, but for now their significance remains unclear.

In the political and military struggles after the murders of the emperor Commodus in 192 C.E. and his successor Pertinax, Harran, Edessa and Nisibis supported the claims of Pescennius Niger against Septimius Severus. Perhaps it was in revenge for this that Severus disbanded the client system and reduced all of Northern Mesopotamia to provincial status, although the pretense of client status and the independence of her king were preserved at Edessa; down to the reign of Gordian III (238–244 C.E.), both she and Harran continued to issue their own coinage, although, in fact, Edessa had been designated as a *colonia* in 214 C.E. Nevertheless, despite the number of honors he had conferred upon Harran and its protecting deity, in the year 217 C.E., the Emperor Caracalla was murdered, according to Dio Cassius, as he was returning from a pilgrimage to the great temple of the Moon god outside of Harran.[12]

In the confusion of the third century C.E., Romans and Sasanid Persians, who had replaced the Parthians on the eastern frontier, fought for control of the region, and Harran, along with other cities in Northern Mesopotamia, changed hands several times. Ardashir I captured Harran and Nisibis in 238 C.E., but with the defeat of the Persians by the emperor Gordian at Resaina in 243 C.E., the cities were restored to Roman control. Despite Gordian's victories, however, his successor, Philip the Arab, effectively abandoned the area by withdrawing Roman armies from Mesopotamia, leaving garrisons only in the principal cities.

Roman policy toward the Persians was one of vacillation: in the year 260 C.E., the Roman emperor Valerian mounted an expedition against Shapur I, who had invaded Roman territory and was besieging Edessa. The expedition was an unmitigated disaster for the Roman forces: Valerian himself was captured, and a Persian inscription records the Roman defeat in the "great battle beyond

---

[12] Dio Cassius, *Epitome*, LXXIX.5.4.

Harran and Edessa." With the help of Odenath of Palmyra, who claimed to rule in the name of the emperor, the Romans continued to harass the Persians as best they could. The Palmyrene king managed to take back Harran and Nisibis from the Persians, but on the whole, repeated forays came to nothing.

The fortunes of the Roman imperial army seemed to change in 297 C.E. when the emperor Galerius, having first been defeated by the Persian army of Narseh near Harran, managed to eventually gain victory and a subsequent peace favorable to Roman interests. The campaigns of Diocletian in 298 C.E. strengthened Roman control: the Sasanians were forced to accept terms which placed Roman boundaries once more beyond the Tigris river. And where military force had failed, the emperor attempted a political solution. Under his plan to reorganize the structure of the Empire, Diocletian divided Mesopotamia in two: the province of Mesopotamia had its capital at Amida; Edessa became the capital of the province of Osrhoene, which included Harran.

For a 40 year period, there was relative peace on the frontier but sporadic fighting broke out once again in 338 C.E., and for many years the situation seemed uncertain. In 359 C.E. the land around Harran was devastated by the forces of Shapur II and Ammianus Marcellinus reports that Roman troops forced the evacuation of the place, "since the town was surrounded only by weak fortifications."[13]

In the year 363 C.E., the emperor Julian set out from Antioch to once again drive the Persians back across the Tigris. Responses to Julian's religious behavior seem to have determined the accounts of his campaign route. The fifth century pagan historian Zosimus reports that Julian was presented with a crown at Sarug (Batnae) by envoys from Edessa who invited him to their city; it was from Edessa that he proceeded to Harran, while he planned his strategy against the Persians.[14] The ecclesiastical historian Sozomen maintains, on the other hand, that the apostate emperor refused to visit the Christian city of Edessa, whose faith he had despised, choosing rather to worship in the temple of "Jupiter."[15]

---

[13] Ammianus Marcellinus, *R.G.*, XVIII.7.3.
[14] Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, III.12.
[15] Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.1.

It was at Harran, according to Ammianus Marcellinus,[16] that Julian, although he had offered sacrifice to the Moon god, was visited by a dream that foretold sorrowful events. The prayers of Julian, like those of Nabonidus, remained unanswered; and the Christians of Edessa did not miss the opportunity to declare that the catastrophe of Roman defeat that ensued was due to Julian's rejection of their city and their faith. That there was a connection between such impiety and the death of the emperor is made clear by Theodoret, the fifth century ecclesiastical historian and Bishop of Cyrrhus, who reports that when the sealed temple at Harran was opened after the death of Julian, "there was seen a woman hung on high by the hairs of her head, and with her hands outstretched. The villain had cut open her belly, and so, I suppose, learned from her liver his victory over the Persians."[17] The pagan inhabitants of Harran, in contrast, were so distressed by the report of Julian's death that they stoned to death the messenger who had brought the terrible news.[18] Jovian, Julian's hastily chosen and short-lived successor (363–64 C.E.), managed to rescue his forces only through what many felt was a shameful treaty: in return for a thirty year truce, Roman territory east and west of the Tigris, including the city of Nisibis, was ceded to the Persians.[19]

From Julian to the Muslim Conquest (363–639 C.E.)

After the death of Julian, we hear little of Harran except in reports of the interminable fighting between Roman and Persian forces. Indeed, almost all our literary evidence about the fortunes of the city must be sought in the sources which deal with her much more famous neighbor, Edessa. It has been suggested that the scarcity of references to Harran is due to the fact that her role as a mercantile center had diminished considerably by this time because Bedouin raids on the caravans made the crossing of the plain of Harran an increasingly dangerous business; as a consequence, caravan routes had shifted to the north of the city, and Harran became merely a

---

[16] Ammianus Marcellinus, *R.G.*, XXIII.1.2–3.

[17] Theodoret, *Ecclestiastical History*, III.21.

[18] Zosimus, *H.N.*, III.34.

[19] Ammianus Marcellinus, *R.G.*,XXV.7.14. For a period of 120 years, according to the Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite, although Zosimus says it was a 30 years' truce (III.31).

town on the frontier that "divides Romans from Assyrians."[20] Although the commercial displacement of Harran must have contributed to an economic decline and thus to a loss of interest by the historians, a more compelling reason may be found in the fact that it was in the period after Julian that Greek, Roman and Syriac historiography became, in large measure, Christianized. As a result, whatever extended references we find to Harran after the reign of Constantine are attacks on its pagan religious practices. An interesting interpretation of the decline of Harran's importance in the Christian period may be found in Libanius, who remarks:

> In Harran there was in the middle of the city a splendid temple considered by many to be the equal of the Serapaeum in Alexandria. On this temple was a tower which was used as a military post and watch-tower, since from its top one could overlook the entire plain of Harran. There were also powerful images in this temple. But when the praetorian prefect Cynegus ordered the pagan temples in Egypt and Syria to close, at which time most were destroyed, this temple in Harran was partially destroyed, and the idols which were in it also were taken away and in part destroyed.[21]

The fifth century was a relatively quiet period for the area; Persians and Romans were otherwise occupied, and Northern Mesopotamia enjoyed a brief respite from military conflict. Byzantine policy was, by and large, one of appeasement; by a treaty of 422 C.E., subsidies were given to the Persians in return for their aid in fighting off the "accursed" Huns, who had invaded Syria in 395 C.E., causing destruction and panic in the region of Edessa and Harran.[22] In the realm of religion it was otherwise, as Christian doctrinal disputes, most notably over Monophysitism, took on political and nationalist overtones which tore apart the internal unity of the Eastern Church.

At the height of this spiritual struggle within the Christian Near East, at the beginning of the sixth century, military conflict between Persians and Greeks once again erupted. After several years of petty quarreling, Khawad, the Persian king, incited the Lakhmid ruler of the Arab city of Hira, Nuʿman II, to plunder the region around Harran and carry off those inhabitants of Harran and Edessa who were unfortunate enough to be outside the walls.

---

[20] Zosimus, *H.N.*, III.13.

[21] Libanius, *Orationes* XXX.7,8.

[22] Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*, ed. and trans. W. Wright (Cambridge, 1882), 8.

> 18,500 were captured besides those who were killed and besides the property and the spoil of all kinds. The reason that all these people were found in the villages was its being the time of the vintage, for not only did the villagers go out to the vintage but also many of the Harranians and Edessans went out and were taken prisoner.[23]

Khawad made an unsuccessful attempt to take Harran with the aid of mercenaries recruited among the Huns and the Bedouin; the military commander of Harran made a sortie, managing to capture the chief of the Huns, who promised to stop his assault upon the city. The Persians also laid siege to Edessa in the fall of 503 C.E., but despite two assaults on the city, they were unsuccessful, and a treaty was eventually signed in 506 C.E. So badly had the region been devastated that taxes were suspended for several years, for fear of wide-spread starvation. Hostilities continued intermittently through much of the sixth century; Persian attack and Byzantine counterattack marked the unfortunate history of the area, which was precariously situated between the two powers. Mundhir III, who ruled as Nuʿman's successor at Hira for more than 50 years, proved a faithful ally of the Persians, leading a continuing series of raids and expeditions against the border provinces of the empire.

Khawad, claiming that the Byzantines had failed to fulfill the fiscal terms of the treaty, resumed warfare in 527 C.E.; yet another short-lived peace was concluded in 531 C.E., for Khosraw I, the son of Khawad, took up the campaign against the Byzantines ten years later. In 540 C.E. and again in 544 C.E., Khosraw led an expedition into Syria and Mesopotamia; the citizens of Edessa were able to buy immunity both times, but when the Harranians offered a similar ransom, it was refused because, he said, "it did not belong to him because the most of them are not Christians but are of the old faith," that is, paganism.[24]

Edessa seems to have been a favorite target of the Persians, in part because of its prosperity, in part because of its claim that its strong Christian faith made it impregnable. The power of its faith was reinforced by defensive architecture. Justininan, after the great flood in 525 C.E. that had killed one-third of the population of Edessa and destroyed its "finest buildings," rebuilt its walls, and at the same time, rebuilt the walls and outworks of Harran, which were falling

---

[23] Joshua the Stylite, 52.

[24] *palaias doxes*: Procopius, *Bella*, II.13.

into ruin because of their great age, and made them invulnerable.[25] A fifty year truce concluded in 562 C.E. did little, however, to improve relations between the great powers; and the land around Edessa and Harran continued to suffer from Persian attacks.

Persia was having its own internal difficulties during this period. Khosraw II was deposed, and fled to the safety of the Emperor Maurice, who, according to the Edessan Chronicles, entertained him lavishly at Edessa and supplied him with forces to regain the throne. Thus when his benefactor Maurice was assassinated in 602 C.E., Khosraw was able to proclaim himself the avenger of the murdered emperor. In the following year, the Persians crossed the frontier and within a few years had taken Harran and Edessa, as well as Antioch and Aleppo; and when Heraclius came to the throne of Byzantium in 610 C.E., he was eager to lead a holy war against the Persians, who by 614 C.E. had conquered Syria-Palestine and taken the holy city of Jerusalem. Perhaps, too, it was a crusade against those he regarded as heretics, the Monophysite Christians, whose views on the nature of Christ were as devastating, in the eyes of the orthodox, to the well-being of the Empire as the Persian armies.

In the short run, Heraclius' military campaign was successful: in a series of lightning attacks, his troops regained the territory of Northern Mesopotamia, including Harran and Edessa, and by 630 C.E. had retaken the holy city of Jerusalem. But this impressive victory in the end did nothing except further alienate from imperial Byzantine rule the already hostile Monophysite Christians of the region and leave them weakened and exposed to the coming onslaught by the armies of Islam. A treaty had been signed by the Byzantines and the Persians in 630 C.E.; but by 636 C.E., Syria had fallen to the Arabs, Persia succumbed the following year, and in the year 639 C.E., the cities of Northern Mesopotamia surrendered in rapid succession to the Muslim forces. The Muslim conquest had brought at least a temporary halt to the region's unhappy function as a battle place between east and west.

The Religion of Harran: Survival and Continuity

Our historical sources from the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman periods tell us little about the religious life of Harran, the "old faith"

---

[25] Procopius, *Aedificia*, II.7.

as the Christian historian Procopius had called it, except to confirm the continuing power of the oracle of the Moon god. It is only with the nominal victory of the Church in the fourth century that Harran reappears in our sources, chiefly as a useful *exemplum* for Syriac Christian writers on the wicked persistence of paganism; in fact, the obvious polemical intent of the accounts of Harranian religion in late antiquity often makes it difficult to evaluate their usefulness. Theodoret described Harran as "a barren spot full of the thorns of paganism and needing abundant labor,"[26] while in his account of the Bedouin conquest around 457 C.E. of Beth Hur, a town near Amida (Diyarbekir) that had been founded by Harran, Isaac of Antioch described the place as "a shoot that grew from the vine of perdition, a (new) Harran that arose in our land," attributing its fall to the pagan practices of its inhabitants.[27]

Christian antagonism toward the pagans of Harran was perhaps fed as well by resentment felt at the fact that the city, which had played a primary role in the Old Testament story of the migration of Abraham recounted in Genesis, and alluded to in the Book of Acts, should be in the hands of the pagans even after the victory of the new faith. The Christian community early on had attempted to claim the numinous power of Harran as its own: at Harran was the monastery of Abraham, where the stone that Jacob had rolled from the top of the well at which he first met his cousin Rachel was venerated.

The majority of inhabitants of Harran seem to have remained untouched by the new faith, even after the battle of the Milvian Bridge. At the end of the fourth century, Harran was visited by the pilgrim abbess Egeria from Aquitania, and she recounted that "except for a few clerics and holy monks, I found not a single Christian; all were pagans."[28] Although prelates from Edessa and Nisibis were in attendance at the Council of Nicaea, Harran did not send legates; no mention is made of a bishop from that city until 361 C.E., when the prelate of Harran, Barsai, was named Bishop of Edessa. The obvious lack of enthusiasm of the Harranians toward Christianity must

---

[26] Theodoret, *E.H.*, IV.15.

[27] *S. Isaaci Antiocheni doctoris syrorum opera omnia* I, Homiliae xi–xii, ed. G. Bickell (Gissae, 1873).

[28] ". . .sed totum gentes sunt." *S. Silviae Aquitanae Peregrinatio ad Loca Sancta* (London, 1887), 105.

have been recognized, for the bishops appointed to serve their spiritual and ecclesiastical needs were placed under the control of the see of Edessa; Barsai himself chose not to reside at Harran.

One must exercise caution, therefore, in the use of the available Christian accounts of the practices of the Harranians, not only because of their authors' specific antipathy to Harranian paganism, but also because many of those works quite obviously belong to the larger more generalized category of anti-pagan rhetoric that was produced against a backdrop of declining Roman fortunes. An antagonism towards cultural Hellenism is evident among the Christian Syriac authors of the period, most notably Ephrem (d. 373 C.E. at Edessa), a man who "had not tasted the wisdom of the Greeks," and it is likely that the rejection of Greek culture, which was perceived as essentially pagan, in favor of native traditions also played a role in the accounts of Harran.[29] The ecclesiastical historian Sozomen compared Ephrem favorably to the ancient Greeks: "His style of writing was so replete with splendid oratory and with richness and temperateness of thought that he surpassed the most approved writers of Greece."[30] There is, on the other hand, an abundance of material, however idealized, concerning the foundations of Christianity at Edessa, but so obscure is the religious history of Harran during this period that it is difficult to interpret Procopius' statement that the Persian king Khosraw refused to take money from the Harranians because most of them were not Christians but of the *palaia doxe*. What was that "old belief?"

Given its proximity and historical connections, Harran's late antique paganism, like the Christianity of Edessa, must have been subject to the same processes of political, cultural and religious acculturation. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to draw too many inferences from the better documented history of Edessa in any analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of Harran during this period. It is necessary to remember, as Drijvers points out in a more general context, that just as it is impossible to refer to Syrian Christianity as a clear-cut religious denomination, it is also impossible to speak of pagan cults and practices as a well-defined entity.[31]

---

[29] Theodoret, *E.H.*, IV.29.

[30] Sozomen, *E.H.*, III.16.

[31] H.J.W. Drijvers, "The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria," *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. Nina Garsoian *et al.* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 35–43.

What documents we have for Harranian religion during this period are meager; there is no late antique religious literary tradition at Harran to parallel that of Edessa. Although any discussion must be as specific to the place as possible, we must take into account the polemical quality of our sources; and whenever analogous material is used, it must be done with caution. This is especially true when the name of the deity appears over a widespread area, as in the case of Nebo or Atargatis: we should not consequently conclude that cultic practices are necessarily the same everywhere, since most often in the traditional popular religions of antiquity, the power and expression of a deity are bound to the group and the place. It is essential to keep these limitations in mind when analyzing the evidence of our sources.

Several Christian documents, including the late fourth century anonymous *Doctrine of Addai*, the hymns of Ephrem, the fifth century homilies attributed to Isaac of Antioch, and the polemical *Homily on the Fall of the Idols* by Jacob, Bishop of Sarug (451–521 C.E.), not only make specific reference to the religion of Harran but also allow us to consider more generally to what degree older particularized beliefs persisted in the face of cultural syncretism. The divine names found in these texts present a mixture of the familiar and the obscure, and are the best indication of the diverse religious traditions that are characteristic of the region. Thus, Addai rhetorically asks the Edessans:

> Who is this Nebo, an idol which ye worship, and Bel which ye honour? Behold there are those among you who adore Bath Nikkal, as the inhabitants of Harran, your neighbors, and Tarʿatha, as the people of Mabbug, and the Eagle as the Arabians, also the Sun and the Moon, as the rest of the inhabitants of Harran, who are as yourselves. Be ye not led away captive by the rays of the luminaries and the bright star; for every one who worships creatures is cursed before God.[32]

Although Jacob's homily provides a slightly different list, it is nevertheless quite specific in its assignment of indvidual deities to particular cities:

> He (i.e. Satan) put Apollo as an idol in Antioch and others with him,
> In Edessa he set Nebo and Bel together with many others.
> He led astray Harran by Sin, Baʿalshamen and Bar Nemre

---

[32] *The Doctrine of Addai, the Apostle*, ed. G. Phillips (London, 1876), 23 ff.

> By my Lord with his Dogs and the goddesses Tarʿatha and Gadlat. . .
> Mabbug made he a city of the priests of the goddess(es)
> And called it with his name in order that it would err forever (goingafter its idols),
> A sister of Harran, which is also devoted to the offerings;
> And in their error both of them love the springs.[33]

Finally, we have the homilies of Isaac of Antioch, which actually deal with Beth Hur, a town founded by Harran, but which make reference to the religious beliefs of the mother city:

> The founders of the place (i.e. Harran) encouraged it by its very name to exchange God for the Sun. . . Look at the Sun, your savior, O city that came forth from Harran . . . The Persians spared her not, for with them she served the sun; the Bedouins left her not, for with them she sacrificed to ʿUzzai. . . For the eyes of the Sun they were exposed, who worshipped the Sun and the Moon.[34]

In systematizing the lists of gods, then, to which reference has been made, we find that the male deities who were said to be worshipped at Harran are the Moon and the Sun, the Lord with his dogs, Baʿalshamen, and Bar Nemre; the female deities include Bath Nikkal, Tarʿatha, and Gadlat and perhaps ʿUzzai, or ʿUzza. In addition, the *Doctrina Addai* seems to indicate some form of planetary or astral worship.

If these documents accurately reflect the admixture of religious beliefs in the region, it would demonstrate the persistent power of the Moon god and other Mesopotamian deities associated with the planets, but that other Semitic cults, both Western Semitic and Arab, had their place; that the Mother Goddess, represented in several forms and under several names, had her shrines, festivals and devotees, as did numerous local Baals, even if much of this tradition was now to be given further explication, at least by some Harranians, by the addition of various esoteric traditions, including astrology and "the magical arts." With the exception of Apollo, the Greek names of the deities are noticeably lacking, indicating that despite the sobriquet of Hellenopolis, traditional Harranian religion

---

[33] P.S. Landersdorfer, *Die Götterliste des mar Jacob von Sarug in seiner Homilie uber der Fall der Gotzenbilder* (Munich, 1914), 51–54; 59–62.

[34] Isaac of Antioch, *Homiliae*, XI.51–62; 99–102; 159, ed. G. Bickell; trans. H.J.W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 158.

was, at least on the surface, little influenced by the rule of the Greek Seleucids.

Bath Nikkal, Tarᶜatha and al-ᶜUzza

The names of the female deities found in our texts represent the same admixture of divine attributes and functions that have become so intertwined by this period that it is difficult to sort them out except by linguistic origin: Bath Nikkal, or Ishtar, who represents the oldest strain in Mesopotamian paganism; Tarᶜatha, or Atargatis, the *Dea Syria*, whose Western Semitic origins, like those of Baᶜalshamen, became buried under a welter of local traditions in late antiquity; and al-ᶜUzza, one of a triad of Arab goddesses whose original functions cannot be clearly determined, but who was later identified with both Venus and Astarte.

The *Doctrina Addai* declares that the Harranians honored the goddess Bath Nikkal, or the daughter of Nikkal (Ningal). The name has been identified as a localized form of Ishtar-Venus,[35] whose worship, of course, was widespread throughout the Near East under an increasing variety of epithets in late antiquity. We have already noted the triadic asssociation of the Moon god, his consort and divine female child; Inanna as the daughter of the Moon god can be found in the Sumerian period, and it has been demonstrated that Sin, Ningal and Bath Nikkal were the most important deities at Harran according to "local cuneiform texts and other Akkadian traditions."[36] In her function as the planet Venus, Bath Nikkal is linked to the Moon god on the stelae of the Babylonian Nabonidus, where her sign as the morning star is found along with lunar and solar symbols.

Bath Nikkal may be a title whose use has specific meaning at Harran, and whose history there can be documented, but the ubiquitous Western Semitic Atargatis (Aramaic: Tarᶜatha) presents greater difficulty, for the *Dea Syria* was worshipped in such a wide variety of forms and such a great number of places that it is impossible to discern any particularities of her cult at Harran during this period, except through inference. The archaeological evidence for

---

[35] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 143.

[36] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 41. cf. E. Dhorme, *Les Religions de Babylonie et d'Assyrie* (Paris, 1945), 54–60.

her worship elsewhere in the region is diverse.[37] Our primary literary text, the second century C.E. *Dea Syria* attributed to Lucian, is, however, far more specific; it describes in great detail the worship of the goddess at Hierapolis (Mabbug), a neighboring city that the *Doctrina Addai* confirms worshipped Tarʿatha, which was linked to Edessa by the *Doctrina Addai*, and called a sister to Harran by Jacob of Sarug in his homily.

Jacob's remark that "in their error both of them (that is, Harran and Mabbug) love the springs" is the clearest statement of her function at Harran and is supported by the goddess' association everywhere with the life-giving power of water. At both Hierapolis and Edessa were ponds filled with her sacred fish; although there is no such reference for Harran, it is possible that the various sacred wells of Harran, such as the one at which Rachel was said by the Christians to have encountered Jacob, may also have been under the protection of the goddess.

She may even have later associations with the pre-Islamic Arab goddess of fate, Manat, whose idol, according to the 9th century Ibn al-Kalbi, "was erected on the seashore in the vicinity of Qudayd between Mecca and Medina."[38] Finally, in the iconography of Atargatis from a number of Syrian cities, she is accompanied by a variety of male consorts. A relief found at Edessa depicting the goddess and a deity has been identified by Drijvers as Hadad, the Syrian weather god with whom she was joined at Hierapolis, but it is not known which male god, if any, served a similar function at Harran.[39]

Nevertheless, although it is tempting to extrapolate from Lucian's account of the Syrian Goddess at Hierapolis a deeper understanding of her worship in Harran and to look for broader parallels in iconography, we must take note once again of the fact that not only is ritual so often tied to place, but that at the same time her various representations in Graeco-Roman period show clear signs of an amalgamation of symbols. Thus she may be represented as the Tyche of a city (Edessa), as the consort of the Syrian storm god Hadad (Hierapolis, Edessa, and Dura-Europus), as the consort of Nergal (Hatra), or as

---

[37] see Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, ch. 4.

[38] Ibn al-Kalbi, *Kitab al-Asnam; Book of Idols*, trans. Nabih amin Faris (Princeton, 1952), 12.

[39] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 80.

Cybele seated between two lions (Hierapolis). Several coins from Harran suggest that the goddess was venerated at Harran, as at Edessa, as the Tyche of the city, although Jacob of Sarug's inclusion of both Tarʿatha and Gadlat argues against this interpretation, since Gadlat is the Aramaic equivalent of Tyche.

As Drijvers concludes in his analysis of the role of Atargatis at Edessa, "The wide range of variants in the cult of the Dea Syria most appropriately demonstrates (such) a process of religious assimilation and articulation. . . Although her cult at Edessa may have been influenced by her centre at Hierapolis, it certainly belonged to the most authentic traditions of the city."[40] The same must be held true for whatever form the Harranian worship of the goddess might have taken.

To what extent Atargatis differs in function from the Arab goddess al-ʿUzza in this period is difficult to say. al-ʿUzza, who according to Isidore of Antioch, was worshipped at Beth Hur, which had a large Arab population, has been identified with a number of female divinities, including Aphrodite and Astarte; she bore the Syriac epithets of *Balti* (my Lady) and *Kawkabta* (the [female] star). At Palmyra, Beltis is the consort of Bel; Astarte is the consort of Baʿalshamen at Tyre.

Given the fact that Beth Hur was founded by Harran, it is likely that al-ʿUzza had her devotees at Harran as well, although what form her worship took at Harran, as well as with which male deity she might have been associated, is impossible to determine. Her original significance in pre-Islamic Arabia remains unclear, although she was certainly worshipped at Mecca. The *Qurʾan* mentions her as one of the three false goddesses whom the Quraysh had worshipped before Islam (53:19); Ibn al-Kalbi testifies that the pagan Quraysh regarded her, along with Manat and Allat, as the daughters of ʿAllah.[41]

Both al-ʿUzza and Bath Nikkal may be the "Bright Star" of the *Doctrina Addai*: "Do not be led away captive by the rays of the luminaries and the Bright Star." The name ʿUzza has as its Arabic root *ʿzz*, to be strong, which would link her to Azizos, the male version of the morning star, who was worshipped in a triad along with his twin, Monimos, the evening star, and the Sun god in a number of

---

[40] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 121.

[41] Ibn al-Kalbi, *The Book of Idols*, 17.

places in northern Syria and Mesopotamia, including perhaps Edessa.[42] We have already seen the extent of Arab political domination in the region around Harran and Edessa in this period, and it is likely that they installed their gods alongside the other members of the local pantheon.

In his "Oration on Helios," the emperor Julian had identified Monimos and Azizos as Hermes and Ares respectively, deities who acted as assessors (*paredroi*) of the Sun God.[43] Azizos was worshipped in Arabia, and the theophoric ʿAbd al-Aziz, "servant of Aziz," was a common Muslim name after Aziz was transformed into a title of Allah. What relationship these male deities had with the female al-ʿUzza is not clear, although it has been suggested that among the Semites, the Venus star was regarded originally as male, and later became bisexual in nature.[44] Like Azizos, al-ʿUzza seems to have embodied a martial nature. The Bedouin were said to have offered human sacrifice to al-ʿUzza; 400 virgins were reported to have been slain at Emesa in honor of the goddess, and to her the sixth century Lakhmid prince Mundhir sacrificed the son of his enemy.[45]

The multiplicity of goddesses and the overlap of functions as demonstrated by our textual and iconographical evidence are indicative of the various ethnic traditions that were to be found in the region: indigenous Mesopotamian, Aramaic, and Arab. To what extent these various strands were interwoven in late antiquity cannot be known. In general, however, the boundaries between the various functions of the divine feminine are less clearly drawn than among the male deities; since the political function of the female was, on the whole, not as well-defined, these goddesses tended to cross social and ethnic boundaries more easily. One may also note as a corollary that none of the goddesses became as clearly identified with their Greek and Roman counterparts as did the male deities.

The Moon and the Sun

The persistence of the worship of the Moon god is attested to at Harran down into late antiquity, not only by our Syriac sources but,

---

[42] cf. discussion in Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 147 ff.

[43] Julianus, *Julian* I, ed. W.C. Wright (Cambridge, Mass., 1913), 413.

[44] J. Henninger, "Uber Sternkunde und Sternkult in Nord- und Zentral Arabien," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 79 (1954), 82–117.

[45] J.B. Segal, *Edessa the Blessed City* (Oxford, 1970), 145.

as we have already seen, by Greek and Roman authors as well. Paradoxically, the wide variety of evidence for such worship in the area around Harran presents a number of difficulties in interpreting the forms and functions of lunar worship during this period. First of all, although our Christian texts speak of devotion to the Moon god in this period, we must be aware that such worship may owe its continued power to forces other than native Mesopotamian.

We have already noted the prevalence of Arab and Nabataean names among the rulers of Edessa and the fact that they installed, as our texts demonstrate, their gods in the pantheon of the city. It is altogether possible, therefore, that contributing to the prominence of the moon during this period was the political, and thus religious, influence of the Bedouin and the Nabataeans who had infiltrated into the region several centuries before. Certain deities, such as al-ʿUzza, are easily identifiable as Arab; and while it is difficult to separate out the various strands that are woven into the worship of the Moon god, we know that the moon played an important part in Bedouin and Nabataean Arab cult. Ultimately, however, the extent to which the prominence of the Moon god was given continued impetus because of Arab political domination is difficult to determine.

Both the *Doctrina Addai* and the Isaac of Antioch's homily on the conquest of Beth Hur connect Harran with the worship of the sun; nevertheless, it is possible that these references have different sources. Since the *Doctrina Addai* mentions Bath Nikkal or Ishtar along with the Sun and the Moon as gods of Harran, it is likely that the anonymous author took as his starting point the traditional Mesopotamian cults that linked the three deities. Isaac of Antioch, on the other hand, in declaiming that the god of Beth Hur was "the Sun, your Savior, O city, that came forth from Harran," may be referring to another source of this worship. Although the sun and moon are joined in the homily—"for the eyes of the Sun they were exposed, who worshipped the Sun and the Moon"—it is clear that at Beth Hur, at least, the Sun was the more important. Such a change in emphasis suggests that what Isaac may be recording is what some have suggested is the influence of another religious tradition, that of the Arabs. J. Teixidor has pointed out that during the Graeco-Roman period, it was the Arabs were responsible for the spread of the cult of the Sun god in the Near East.[46]

---

[46] J. Teixidor, *The Pagan God* (Princeton, 1977), 49.

In the earlier Babylonian-Assyrian tradition, Shamash, the Sun, played a relatively minor role in the political pantheon. One of the three children of the Moon god, he is the power inherent in the light, and therefore the enemy of darkness; he becomes in the social sphere a power for justice and fairness. At night, he is in the underworld adjudicating disputes among the dead, and is called upon to witness injustice, when all other recourse fails. Nevertheless, although Shamash was the guardian of justice, the eye that sees all, his own power was limited; all our texts indicate that the Sun was clearly subordinate to the preeminence of the Moon.

It was only during the Hellenistic period that the Sun god took on greater prominence in Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, the question of whether the Arabs prior to their contact with Syrian and Mesopotamian traditions practiced any form of astral worship is a difficult one. Little is known about the religious beliefs of the pre-Islamic Arabs, beyond a welter of divine names, but Ibn al-Kalbi's *Book of Idols* indicates that even before their settlement in Northern Mesopotamia, the Arabs had granted an important place in their pantheon to the celestial bodies, and of these, the Moon and Venus were most prominent. It has been argued, however, that assertions for the existence of astral worship among the pre-Islamic Arabs were the product of a reworked history of the Arab past produced primarily by those Muslim scholars who sought to see parallels between pre-Islamic Arab religion and the doctrines of the Sabians of Harran, at least as they understood them. Whatever planetary associations Arab deities had, then, would be later accretions.[47]

Several other related factors must be taken into account as well. First was the increased popularity of the cult of the Sun god in late antiquity, expressed in a variety of forms, including Sol Invictus, Mithra, Malakbel, and the Baʿal of Emesa, and in the third century, at least, the product of Roman imperialism and the power of the Syrian Julia Maesa and her grandson, the emperor Elagabalus. In fact, Isaac seems to have associated the worship of the sun at Beth Hur with the Persians, rather than the Bedouin: "the Persians spared her not, for with them she served the Sun; the Bedouins left her not, for with them she sacrificed to ʿUzzai." The second was a growing interest in astrology, which gave to the Sun god a promi-

---

[47] See J. Henninger, "Uber Sternkunde und Sternkult in Nord- und Zentral-Arabien."

nence which he had not previously possessed. Finally, the increasing interest of the philosophers, especially the Neoplatonists, in the sun as the embodiment, in the sensible world, of the Good in the intelligible world, must have had its effect of the religious beliefs in at least some circles. To what extent, however, any of these perceptions influenced accounts of Harranian religion during this period is impossible to determine.

The Gods at Sumatar Harabesi

In addition to this conflation of traditions, there is a peculiar discrepancy between our eastern and western sources in their accounts of Harranian religion. The Christian Syriac texts provide a number of names in addition to the Moon god, while Roman historians such as Ammianus Marcellinus mention only the oracular powers of the god at Harran. Neither provides any explication of ritual. The site or sites of pre-Muslim temples to the Moon god within the city itself are unknown, although two locations suggest themselves: the Great Mosque and the fortress palace, whose earliest foundations date to the eighth century C.E. Earlier references to temples of the Moon god, however, seem to indicate that the major shrines may have been outside the city. When Esarhaddon came to Harran in 675 B.C.E.,

> he saw in the outskirts (?) of Harran a temple of cedar wood, (in it) the god Sin was leaning upon a staff, with two crowns upon his head.[48]

Crassus met his death, according to Plutarch, near a hill called Sinnaca, an unspecified distance from Harran, while Herodian records the assassination of Caracalla on his return from a temple of the Moon goddess (whom Plutarch calls Selene) outside the city. Neither location, however, can be determined.

By way of contrast, Sumatar Harabesi, an oasis located in the Tektek mountains, about 25 miles northeast of Harran and 35 miles southeast of Urfa, presents us with some of our most puzzling epigraphical and archaeological evidence for a localized cult of the Moon god in the early centuries of the Christian era. The site encompasses a central mount, and a group of nine ruined buildings to the west and north, forming an arc about one-quarter to a half mile

---

[48] ANET 605

from the mount. Six of the structures, which are of various geometric shapes, are built over grottoes. Drijvers has pointed to their similarity to rock-cut tombs, and has suggested that they were used for burial places for the rulers of the site.[49]

First visited early in this century by H. Pognon, who recorded several inscriptions and reliefs found in a nearby cave whose function is still in question,[50] its remains have been more recently surveyed by both J. B. Segal and H.J.W. Drijvers.[51] The present author visited the site in 1977. In 1952, Segal discovered a series of Syriac inscriptions and dedicatory reliefs inscribed in rock on the top of the "central mount," a hill about 150 feet high that is the focal point of the site. More recently, the texts of these inscriptions which have been dated to the second half of the second century C.E., have been collected, edited and translated by Drijvers.[52]

Two reliefs set in niches, accompanied by inscriptions, are found on the northern side of the hill. One of the figures is the bust of a male behind whose shoulders appears a lunar crescent; the inscription to the left of the niche, as transcribed and translated by Drijvers, reads:

> Son of Sila (?)
> Sila made the image
> to Sin the god for the life of
> Tiridates son of Adona and for the life of
> his brother.

The inscription on the right of this figure reads:

> Bar KWZ'
> May be remembered ZKY and his sons
> before the god.

It would seem that the lunar crescent must designate the figure as the god himself. Certainly such an interpretation is supported by earlier iconographical and numismatic evidence. The lunar crescent motif is echoed elsewhere at Sumatar Harabesi by the relief carved

---

[49] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 138.

[50] H. Pognon, *Inscriptions Semitiques de la Syrie, de la Mesopotamie et de la region de Mossoul* (Paris, 1907), 23–38.

[51] J.B. Segal, "Pagan Syriac Monuments in the Vilayet of Urfa," *Anatolian Studies* III (1953), 97–120.

[52] H.J.W. Drijvers, *Old Syriac (Edessean) Inscriptions* (Leiden, 1972), 5–19; and *Cults and Beliefs*, 122 ff.

on the wall in Pognon's cave which is dated to approximately the same period. Drijvers has described the cave relief as "a horned pillar of oval shape, resembling a stylized human person wearing horns on his head,"[53] and has suggested that the horns are those of the lunar crescent.

To the right of the first central mount relief is a full-length portrait of a male, wearing a headdress made of what are perhaps peacock feathers, and holding some object in his left hand. The identification of this figure has not been clearly established. The inscription to the right of the full length figure declares that the offering was commanded by the god to Maʿna and dates it to the 13th of Adar, 476 of the Seleucid Era (165 C.E.). Whether the figure is some divinity or the dedicator of the offering, dressed in ceremonial or even priestly garb, is impossible to determine at this point.

Of even greater significance for an understanding of the particularity of the function of the Moon god at Sumatar Harabesi are three of the ten inscriptions carved on the surface of the central mount, addressed to *Mrlhʾ*, which name Drijvers has transcribed as "Marᵉlahe," i.e., the Lord of the Gods. Pointing out that this title is the Syriac equivalent of the epithet Bel-ilani that was applied to Sin in the Harran inscriptions of Nabonidus, Drijvers has concluded that the deity called Marelahe at Sumatar is the Moon god of Harran. The title seems not to be specific to any one deity, but rather is used to denote the chief divinity of various local pantheons. Such an understanding of the title *Marelahe* would point clearly to the survival of the indigenous cult of the moon, and is supported by both the iconographical evidence of the lunate figures on the mount and in Pognon's cave as well as the fact that the only deity clearly referred to by name on the mount is Sin.

Segal's suggested reading of the same text is Marilaha—the Lord God—which could then be recognized as an epithet of Baʿalshamen.[54] Baʿalshamen, the Lord of Heaven, is an epithet of a Western Semitic deity, whose worship had been disseminated from the coastal cities of Phoenicia to Mesopotamia and Northern Arabia. At Tyre he was joined in a triad with Astarte and Melqart, the latter a youthful god whom the Greeks later identified with Heracles. By this period, the title of Baʿalshamen seems to have been

---

[53] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 130.
[54] Segal, *Edessa*, 59.

used to designate any god who was seen as the possessor of the heavens.

Whatever specificity the name might have had at places such as Ugarit and later Tyre and Byblos was lost as it was increasingly employed as a generic term in the Near East to designate the supreme god of any local pantheon; Baʿalshamen is the highest power of the heavens, and is often represented as accompanied by the sun and the moon. Teixidor suggests that in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the title was applied to any god whose functions could be made equivalent to those of Zeus, a category that included not only Baʿalshamen's earliest role, as a god of the weather, but also his designation as *Mareʿalma* (Lord of Eternity) at Palmyra, whence comes our best archaeological evidence for his worship in the Graeco-Roman period.[55]

Aside from the homily of Jacob of Sarug, there is no other reference to the worship of Baʿalshamen at Harran. Nevertheless, it is possible, as Segal has suggested, that the god makes a reappearance as the Arabic *Rabbu ʾlalihati*, a literal rendering of the Syriac *Mrlhʾ*, found in a list of Harranian gods recorded by Ibn al-Nadim.[56] Segal argues that this is the same deity mentioned in Sarakhsi's account of the Sabians found elsewhere in the *Catalog* of a Creator who has delegated the rule of the universe to the celestial bodies.

The first of the three inscriptions from Sumatar Harabesi that mention *Mrlhʾ* was dedicated by Tiridates, "son of Adona ruler of Arab," who set up an altar and a baetyl to the god for the life of "my lord the king and his sons and for the life of Adona my father and for my life and of my brethren and our children" in the month of Shebat, 476 (165 C.E.); the second by Absamya son of Adona, "the military commander;" the last, also dated to 165 C.E., mentions *mnysh*, Maʿna, *blbnʾ* and *ʾlkwd*, sons of Adona and brothers of Tiridates, who is here described not only as the ruler of Arab, but as *bwdr* of Marelahe and possessor of the stool. The meaning of *bwdr* is unknown but may designate a priestly title, and the stool may symbolize perhaps some badge of office. A Syriac inscription on a tomb tower at Serin, dated 73 C.E., designates it as the burial place of a *bwdr* of the god Nahai.[57]

---

[55] Teixidor, *The Pagan God*, 27.
[56] Segal, "Pagan Syriac Monuments in the Vilayet of Urfa," 116.
[57] Drijvers, *Old Syriac (Edessan) Inscriptions*, 2–3.

Drijvers has identified Arab as the desert region east of Edessa, extending to the Tigris.[58] At various times in the second century C.E., Arab seems to have been politically dependent upon Edessa; thus, it is possible that "my lord the king" may be the ruler of Edessa. Who the rulers of Arab were during this period cannot be determined with any certainty. Nevertheless, it seems likely that what we are seeing in these inscriptions from Sumatar Harabesi dedicated to Marelahe is the well-attested role of the Moon god as the bestower of political power. It was to Sin that Nabonidus had thought he owed his throne; this later evidence from Sumatar seems to point to the continuity of the political function of the god. That the buildings which surround the site probably served as tombs for the rulers of Arab mentioned in the inscription serves to reinforce such an interpretation.

The obscure but probably religious function of the *bwdr* mentioned at Sumatar Harabesi may have survived down into the Islamic period. In the *Catalog*, Ibn al-Nadim gives the text of the mysteries purportedly performed in the "house of the Bughadharis" (*bayt al-Bughadhariyin*) by the Sabians of Harran. *Bughadhariyin* may be merely an Arabic transcription of the Syriac *bwdr*, and may signify a class of priests of some sort.[59] If such a orthographical equivalent can be established, it may provide the evidence for the survival of this expression of moon worship at Harran down into the Islamic period, even if we accept the suggestion by Drijvers that "my lord the king," to whom Tiridates sets up the offering, is the ruler of Edessa. The function of Pognon's cave might have been, then, as the "House of the Bughadharis," a place of initiation for the functionaries of the god.

Bar Nemre, whose name has generally been understood to mean "Son of the Shining One," may also be connected with the power of the Moon god, although his identity has not been clearly established. Rene Dussaud considered the title to be an epithet of the Sun god, perhaps Shamash, who in Mesopotamian myth is the son of Sin.[60] With an eye toward the divine triad of Bel, Aglibol and Malakbel found at Palmyra, Dussaud posited the worship of a similar group at Harran, here consisting of Baʿalshamen, Sin and the

---

[58] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 130. cf. also, Pognon, *Inscriptions semitiques*, 34 ff.
[59] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 129. See discussion in chapter 8.
[60] R. Dussaud, *La Penetration des Arabes en Syrie Avant Islam* (Paris, 1907), 111 ff.

Sun as Bar-Nemre. Drijvers, on the other hand, has identified the Shining One as Sin, and Bar Nemre as the Babylonian Nusku, the god of fire, who was worshipped at Harran as his son, since his fire embodied the light of the new moon.[61] If this latter identification is correct, it represents the survival of the linking of the two gods at Harran, as demonstrated by the prayer of the mother of Nabonidus, which mentions Nusku along with the Moon god, as well as by Esarhaddon's encounter with the two gods at the temple outside Harran.

Since elsewhere Nabu and Nusku are closely linked, and may in fact be least functionally the same, it may be possible to recognize in Bar Nemre the god Nebo himself.[62] Although both the *Doctrina Addai* and Jacob of Sarug agree that Nebo held primacy of place at Edessa, such a reading suggests that he might have had a position in the Harranian pantheon as well. Given the close association of Nebo and Sin, the identification of Bar Nemre with Nusku and Nebo is not unlikely, but one must then also note in this context the clear subordination of Nebo to the moon deity at Harran.

A further connection between Nebo and Harran perhaps may be found in the varied intellectual activity for which the city was later noted. We have already discussed Nabu's close ties with the Moon god and his increasing importance in the first millennium B.C.E. The gradual process of intense intellectual interaction between Near Eastern and other civilizations that began during the Hellenistic period and after produced seemingly contradictory results: when new systems from without impinged upon the old, the internal evolution of Mesopotamian religious ideology seems to have ceased at the same time that the syncretistic process began to define itself.

In part, it is, of course, the consequence of political realities, for the declining political fortunes of the cities of Mesopotamia tended to obviate the need for a political hierarchy mirrored in the divine, although, as we have seen in the case of the worship of Sin at Sumatar Harabesi, the political function of that god was never completely submerged. We must also take into account that religious synthesis is at best an uneven process, influenced by social status and cohesiveness as well as a host of other factors. To what extent this cultural

---

[61] Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 144.

[62] Gadd, "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus," 40.

process had any effect on those who had no knowledge or interest in religious ideologies is difficult to measure.

Nevertheless, the failure of Nabu to supersede Marduk-Bel may also illustrate what happens to a symbolic universe when it is faced with extraordinary disruption: not only does ritualized behavior take on even greater importance; change in and of itself is perceived as threatening. Thus, Nebo retained his older functions as the son of Marduk-Bel and as political protector at places like Edessa until the end of paganism; yet, at the same time, he came to be linked with those deities in other religious systems whose chief function was as bestowers of a revealed wisdom: the Greek Hermes, the Egyptian Thoth and the Persian Hoshang, as well as Apollo and Orpheus in the Hellenistic and early Christian periods, Enoch or Idris later under Islam. Among the Mandaeans, Nebo is considered as the Lord of wisdom and knowledge, and in this role he even stands in opposition to the Moon god. In part, this was made easier by his identification in Mesopotamian astrology and planetary worship with Mercury, who became an important figure in the Hermetic tradition.

The structures found at Sumatar may be open to the same multiple levels of meanings. Discernible among the surviving buildings are four distinctive forms: cylindrical, square, cylindrical upon a quadrilateral base, and rectangular. Although conforming with the tomb architecture of the region, two features in particular make them distinctive: 1) the variety of distinct geometric shapes within a limited locale, and 2) their orientation toward the "sacred mount." It is tempting to try to visualise in these buildings, as Segal has done,[63] Masʿudi's description of the Sabian temples in the *Golden Meadows*:

> The Harranian Sabians have temples according to the names of the intellectual substances and the stars. . . (The temple) of Saturn is hexagonal; of Jupiter, triangular; of Mars, long (rectangular); the Sun square; that of Venus, a triangle in a quadrangle; that of Mercury, a triangle inside an elongated quadrangle, and that of the moon, octagonal. The Sabians have in them symbols and mysteries which they keep hidden.[64]

---

[63] Segal, "Pagan Syriac Monuments in the Vilayet of Urfa," 115 ff.; see also Drijvers, "Bardaisan of Edessa and the Hermetica," *Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux* 21 (1969–70), in which he took a similar position.

[64] Chwolsohn II, 367.

Perhaps what we are witnessing, however, in the seeming parallels between Masʿudi's account and the buildings at Sumatar is merely the superimposition of Hermetic interpretation on a variety of earlier traditions. It is possible that Sumatar was a sanctuary of a planetary cult, but it is also possible that the geometric forms continued to take on new meanings over time, without ever losing older functions: tomb architecture, worship of the planets, astrology and finally Hermetic understanding.

My Lord with His Dogs

"My Lord with His Dogs" has been almost universally identified as a localized form of Nergal, the ruler of the underworld and the brother of Sin, a view supported by the iconography, most notably a relief from Hatra in Northern Iraq depicting Nergal with scorpions, snakes and three dogs.[65] It is possible that these dogs associated with the god serve some sort of guardian function, as, for example, does Cerberus. Evidence for such an interpretation is found at Harran itself; on the wall piers flanking the southeast gate of the citadel are images in relief of dogs, dating from the eleventh century, and it is possible that they serve the same apotropaic function.[66] In a much earlier period, the Assyrians would bury figures of dogs under the threshhold, so that their spirits might repel the attacks of evil demons trying to enter the house.[67]

We have already considered the possible meanings of the kinship of Nergal and Sin in Mesopotamian mythology; to what extent and how it might have been reinterpreted in the Hellenistic period and after is difficult to determine. It has been been simultaneously argued that 1) the worship of Nergal at Harran in this period merely represents a survival from the traditional Mesopotamian pantheon; 2) that the prominence of Nergal at Harran along with Sin is indicative of the dualism inherent in ancient Mesopotamian thought; or 3) that the reference to the god is proof of the influence of the

---

[65] Drijvers, "Mithra at Hatra?", *Acta Iranica, Textes et Memoires* vol. IV, *Etudes Mithraiques* (Leiden, 1978), 165.

[66] D.S. Rice, "A Muslim Shrine at Harran," BSOAS VXVII/3 (1955), 66.

[67] E.A.W. Budge, *Amulets and Superstition* (London, 1930), 99.

dualism of Zoroastrianism or even gnosticism, given his identification with the Zoroastrian and Mithraic Ahriman.[68] We shall return to these questions shortly.

---

[68] See, e.g., H. Lewy, "Points of Comparison Between Zoroastrianism and the Moon-Cult of Harran," 138–161.

CHAPTER THREE

HARRANIAN RELIGION: SYNCRETISM AND ASSIMILATION

The Identification of Traditions

Language and texts

What our literary and archaeological sources make abundantly clear is that, whatever the political consequences of the Persian, Greek, and Parthian occupations of Harran and its environs, pre-Hellenistic Semitic religious traditions seem to have remained predominant there; for despite apparent shifts of meaning and changes in intellectual expression, ritual and cultic practices tend to be altered as little as possible as long as they are seen to be efficacious. Sweeping claims have been made, however, for the influence of Persian and Greek perspectives in Mesopotamia during the post-Babylonian period; but although evidence for the presence of these traditions can be found, we must be careful, for a number of reasons, not to overvalue the effects of the processes of religious syncretism.

First of all, even when we can see a variety of practices and beliefs, it does not necessarily follow that there has been mutual influence. All that may be reflected is the heterogeneity of populations in northern Mesopotamia following the Persian and Greek occupations. Throughout the Graeco-Roman and Christian periods, the geographical entity of Syria never possessed a unifying culture. As we have seen from the history of Northern Mesopotamia in this period, even the term Semitic must be seen as embracing a variety of cultures, ranging from the earliest Assyrian, Babylonian and Hebrew, to Aramaic and Arab.

Secondly, syncretism was often at best a self-conscious intellectual exercise, which left untouched the most fundamental and sacred aspects of ritual and cult. Its most articulate spokesmen were to be found in two segments of the population: those members of the ruling class—Persians, Parthians, Greeks and Romans—who sought to assimilate that which was alien into their own systems of belief; and those of the native populations who had the most to gain from

explaining themselves and their traditions to their new rulers.

Finally, there were those who simply rejected traditions they regarded as alien. One of the most vocal critics of Hellenism, Ephrem, likened it to poison: "Happy is the man who has not tasted of the venom of the Greeks."[1] His hostility toward Greek, i.e., pagan, wisdom did not stem, moreover, solely from religious antagonism; in the fourth century, at least, such attacks could be seen as an assertion of a still vigorous local Syriac culture. Sebastian Brock has pointed out that it was not until the fifth and sixth centuries that translation of large numbers of non-biblical Greek literary works into Syriac began, and a "hellenized" literary style began to emerge.[2]

Nevertheless, it is also apparent that once the process of the assimilation of traditional Greek wisdom had begun, it produced a wide variety of literature in translation, ranging from Homer to much of the Aristotelian corpus (although very little Plato) to perhaps esoterica as well, much of which would eventually become part of the Islamic inheritance. Harran, along with Edessa and Nisibis, is known to have been a center for the translation of Greek texts into Syriac; how long that process persisted at Harran is difficult to determine, but the continued survival of a strong pagan tradition at Harran that could arouse the attacks of an Ephrem or Jacob of Sarug, as well as the evidence provided by our later Muslim sources, make a compelling argument for the vigor of a Graeco-Syrian intelligentsia up through the time of the Muslim conquest. Even in the Muslim period Greek works were commonly translated first into Syriac and then into Arabic. Ḥunayn Ibn Ishaq (d. 873 C.E.), personal physician to Mutawakkil and renowned scholar of Greek medical texts, reported that Syriac was the intermediary language that he and his son used in their translations.

Christianity at Edessa

The important role of Edessa in the received history of Christianity in Northern Mesopotamia serves merely to complicate any analysis

---

[1] Ephrem Syrus, *Hymni de Fide* II.1, CSCO 154–155, ed. E. Beck (Louvain, 1955).

[2] S. Brock, "Greek into Syriac and Syriac into Greek," *Journal of the Syriac Academy* III (1977), 406–422.

of Harranian religion in this period. The Christian community of Edessa countered Harranian claims to the great antiquity of their devotion to the Moon god by claiming for their Church a pre-apostolic foundation, maintaining that their king Abgar V (4 B.C.E.–7 C.E. and 13–50 C.E.) had accepted the teachings of Jesus even before the crucifixion.

There are in the *Apocrypha* several versions of the conversion of Abgar, who, having been struck down by an incurable illness, was miraculously healed through the power of Jesus. *The Acts of the Holy Apostle Thaddeus* relates that Abgar sent a courier, Ananias, to Jesus with a letter asking for his help. Jesus sent the messenger back with the *mandylion*, a cloth on which he had wiped his face, and which now bore his image miraculously preserved upon it. Abgar had fallen down and "adored the likeness, was cured of his disease before Thaddeus came." After the death of Jesus, Thaddeus, one of the twelve Apostles, came to Edessa and with the help of Abgar, destroyed pagan temples and built Christian churches.[3] The *Doctrina Addai* maintained that it was Addai, one of the seventy, who had been sent by Judas called Thomas after the crucifixion to cure the king of a painful illness by the laying on of hands, in fulfillment of Jesus' promise, and had thus converted Abgar through the miracle of healing.[4]

According to Eusebius, who claimed to have seen copies of the correspondence that were preserved in the archives of Edessa, Abgar, once stricken, wrote to Jesus, praising his power, and asking, "I have therefore written to you to ask that you would take the trouble to come to me and heal the disease from which I suffer." Jesus, in response, promised that a Disciple would come to heal him; and after the crucifixion and ascension, Judas "who was Thomas" sent Thaddeus to Edessa to heal the king.[5] Procopius adds that in his letter Jesus had assured Abgar that "the city will never be taken by the barbarians." According to the historian, the text of the letter had been inscribed on the walls of the city gates as a form of divine defense.[6]

Yet, the extent to which pagan traditions persisted in that most

---

[3] *Acts of the Holy Apostle Thaddeus*, ANF viii, 558.
[4] *The Teaching of Addaeus the Apostle*, ANF viii, 657.
[5] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* I.13.
[6] Procopius, *Bella*, II.12.26.

Christian of cities in this period even after Constantine is made obvious by the diatribes of Ephrem, whose hymns are filled both with numerous references to pagan gods and exhortations against divination, magic and astrology at Edessa.[7] An imperial rescript of the Emperor Theodosius, issued in 382 C.E., had given permission to the Edessans to assemble in the pantheon, although sacrifices to the gods were proscribed;[8] and even the Emperor's much harsher decree of 391 C.E., forbidding the offering of sacrifices, libations and divinations and closing down pagan temples, imposing severe penalties on those who disobeyed was, as we have already noted, only partially successful.

In the next century, the homilies of Isaac of Antioch (d. before 461 C.E.), and Jacob of Sarug (d. 521 C.E.), as well as the decree of Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa, (d. 435–36 C.E.), ordering the closing of four pagan shrines, reveal the continued attractions of the old gods. Joshua the Stylite's *Chronicle* records with dismay the celebration of pagan rites at Edessa in the year 497 and 498 C.E.:

> There came round again the time of that festival at which the pagan myths used to be recited; and the citizens took even more pains about than usual. . .For these reasons they neglected to go to prayer, and not one of them bestowed a thought on his duty. . . A proof of God's justice was manifested toward us for the correction of our evil conduct, for in the month Iyar, when the day arrived for the celebration of the wicked heathen festival, there came a vast quantity of locusts into our country from the south.[9]

Whatever had been the true state of the Christian faithful in Edessa, however, in the minds of the theologians and ecclesiastical historians, Harran and Edessa came to represent two opposing ideals in late Near Eastern antiquity, especially in the years after Julian's death: Harran was the city of the Hellenes (i.e. pagans), while Edessa, because of its apostolic associations, had secured herself a place in the sacred geography of Christianity.

Although one may perhaps dispute the authenticity of both the letter and the *mandylion*,[10] it is nonetheless clear that Christianity

---

[7] Ephrem Syrus, *Hymni contra Haereses*, CSCO 169–170, ed. E. Beck (Louvain, 1957).

[8] *Codex Theodosianus*, XVI.10.3.

[9] *Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*, 21–23, trans. W. Wright (Cambridge, 1882); corrected by Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs*, 43.

[10] See A. Cameron, "The Sceptic and the Shroud" (London, 1980) for its history.

had put down strong roots in Northern Mesopotamia at least by the beginning of the third century and perhaps before; but it was a Christianity that was to be increasingly influenced by a number of variegated religious traditions: not only the ancient Mesopotamian, Syrian, Arab, Nabataean and Parthian forms of ritual and worship and their concepts of divine power, but also numerous expressions of Hellenistic and Semitic esotericism: gnosticism and Hermeticism which had been spawned there, as well as a Greek philosophy that had taken new roots in the soil of near eastern religion. Such a melange makes it impossible to speak of Northern Mesopotamia as a cultural or religious unity during this period.

In addition, Judaism had maintained a powerful presence in Mesopotamia since the time of the Babylonian captivity: the largest Jewish community in the region was eastward at Nisibis; and according to Josephus, the kingdom of Adiabene, with whom Edessa had dynastic ties, was supposedly ruled in the first century C.E. by a dynasty that had converted to Judaism.[11] Whatever we may make of the truth of that story, Edessa itself had several synagogues, and it is likely that the Jewish communities in Edessa and Adiabene played an important role in the establishment of Christianity in Northern Mesopotamia.[12] Finally, we must take into account the religious practices of the Arab tribes who had gained a political foothold in the region and who ruled sporadically at Edessa and probably Harran as well after the collapse of Seleucid power.

The variety of influences which shaped the Christianity of the region can be best illustrated by the sectarian struggles that took place at Edessa. Monophysite and Nestorian as well as the orthodox Chalcedonian: each reached back into older localized sacred traditions to shape its doctrine: each had its own bishop; each had its own school; and each possessed what was claimed to be the original letter to Abgar as well as the true *mandylion.* At times, however, the bitterness of the Edessans toward Harran seems to have stemmed from older rivalries that had little to do with religion, as when Ephrem resorts to historical distortion in making this claim for the spiritual superiority of Edessa:

---

[11] Josephus, *Antiquities* XX.17–37. Segal, *Edessa: the Blessed City*, 65–70, has pointed to the parallels between the conversion stories of Abgar and Ezad, the king of Adiabene; and H.J.W. Drijvers informs me that the story cannot be true.

[12] See, e.g., A.F.J. Klijn, *Edessa, de stad van de Apostel Thomas* (Baarn, 1962), 31 ff.

> Thy waters are bitter and thy children harsh; O Harran, make thyself sweet with the Cross. . . . My treasure, O Harran, is in thy vicinity, the famed and beauteous Edessa. O daughter, be like thy mother who is the salt of the universe, and with her doctrine season thy mind. . .Thou, O Harran, art filthy. Behold, thy mirror is beautiful and pure; adorn thyself by her, the blessed one that is before thee.[13]

Persians and Semites

The victory of the Persians over Nabonidus in 539 B.C.E. brought face to face two hieratic systems which nourished each other by processes that can be only dimly perceived. According to Persian tradition, only a short time before, Zoroaster (c. 628–551 B.C.E.) had initiated a purification of the old Iranian religion, shaping it into a more clearly defined dualistic system in which the supreme deity Ahura Mazda or Ohrmazd governed the *Amesha Spentas*, the forces of truth and light, who are perceived as aspects of Ohrmazd.

In opposition stands Angra Mainyu, or Ahriman, the Lord of Lie and Darkness, whose demonic hordes threaten the world with destruction. Man is forced to make an active choice between the two, and thus life becomes an ethical battlefield between the powers of good and evil. Although the sage had reduced the status of innumerable other deities of the old pantheon to that of *daevas*, or spirits, by the end of the Achaemenid period many of them had regained their position in the pantheon, most particularly the Sun god Mithra and Anahita, the source of all fertility.

Although in earlier Indo-Iranian myth, Mithra was a god of light, embodying Friendship and Contract, who guards over the order of the cosmos, in Zoroastrianism, he was placed among the *Yazatas*, or worshipful ones, who rank below the *Amesha Spentas*, and who are guardian spirits of the heavenly bodies or the personification of abstract ideals such as peace or friendship. In this configuration, Mithra became the guardian of Truth and Order, a mighty warrior who led the forces of Light into victory. The path of the god's transformation into the Roman Mithras has not been fully traced, but the Roman cult bears the obvious marks of Mesopotamian influence, particularly the increased role of astral doctrine. What particularized form the Mithraic cult took in the Near East before its entrance

---

[13] Ephrem Syrus, *Hymni Contra Haereses*.

into the Roman world is still a matter of debate, but evidence points to at least the conflation of Mithra with Shamash and of Ahriman with Nergal.[14]

The dualism inherent in Persian religious tradition may have had its effect upon Christian as well as pagan. Although the extent of Persian religious influence during the Parthian period is hard to gauge, since the Parthians themselves subscribed to rather free-wheeling mixture of pre-Zoroastrian Persian religion and Babylonian astral doctrine, the teachings of the religiously conservative Magi under the Sasanians as well as the gnostic teachings of the Persian Mani, who wrote in Syriac, present two different models of a dualistic universe.

There was a Manichaean community at Edessa, and the Nestorians maintained a strong presence in the city at least until the "School of the Persians" was ordered closed by imperial decree in 489 C.E. According to the *Chronicle* of the Bishop Dionysius of Tel Mahre, in the eighth century C.E., there was a Manichaean church at Harran,[15] and Biruni later maintained that Zoroaster belonged to the sect at Harran,[16] where he used to go with his father "to meet Elbus the philosopher, and to acquire knowledge from him."[17] The most likely connection between the Persians and the Christianity of the region during this period must have been these dualistic interpretations of the cosmos that became part of Christological disputation.

Greeks and the Near East

The Greeks who arrived with Alexander were merely, then, the latest in a series of invaders. Earlier Greek contacts with the civilizations of the ancient Near East had produced merely fascination and incomprehension: the Greeks were awed by the size and antiquity of their monuments, at the hieratic nature of their political

---

[14] See, e.g., A.D.H. Bivar, "Mithra and Mesopotamia," *Mithraic Studies* II (1975), 275–289.

[15] Chwolsohn II, 130.

[16] Biruni, *Kitab al-Athar al-Baqiyah ʿan al-Qurun al Khaliyah*, ed. C.E. Sachau (Leipzig, 1878); *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, ed. and trans. C.E. Sachau (London, 1879), 32.

[17] S.H. Taqizadeh, "A New Contribution to the Materials Concerning the Life of Zoroaster," BSOAS, VIII (1937), 953.

structure, but especially at the complexity of their religious beliefs and rituals. The Hellenes eventually came to view the peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia as the repositories of a wisdom and learning more venerable than their own. In the Greek view, older was, by definition, better; and therefore Egypt and Mesopotamia became the focus of intellectual and religious inquiry for at least some Greeks even before Alexander.

And yet, it was in its earliest stages an admiration tinged with bewilderment and contempt, for the Greeks, who had not so long before anthropomorphized their own gods, could not reconcile the acknowledged learning of the priestly classes with what they regarded as bizarre religious rituals and iconography. This ambivalence, strengthened by centuries of political conflict, was the hallmark of social and intellectual relations between east and west throughout classical antiquity, an ambivalence brought into even sharper focus by the conquests of Alexander. In the end, however, out of that confrontation was eventually concocted a political, cultural, intellectual and religious melange—a product of both ideological synthesis and emotional syncretism which had their sources in several particular conditions.

In part, the type of ideological synthesis was determined by the intended audience: Palestinian Christianity, for example, bore the unmistakable imprint of first century messianic Judaism, whose offspring it was, while in its Hellenized form, made suitable for export to the gentile Graeco-Roman world, the Jewish connection was either scanted or refuted. Similarly, the Near Eastern mystery cults were often purged of their more alien rituals before being deemed acceptable by the Romans, although it was often the esoterica that had made them so appealing in the first place. Greeks and Romans saw what they wanted to see, and those who had opted to enter into the cultural milieu of the conquerors were often eager to oblige.

Thus did Zeus, with a few changes of appearance, easily become Amon; and Dionysus, Sabazios; and Baʿalshamen and Adonai, Jupiter, abetted, perhaps, by those who were willing for various reasons to gloss over the finer distinctions. Conversely, the persistence of particularized practices and beliefs helped to shape new outlooks and perceptions when cult or creed was transported into local traditions of the Near East and Egypt. Just as Christianity was to be so defined at times by local traditions as to render it heresy in the eyes of those who defined orthodoxy, so paganism in its myriad localized

forms was influenced and reshaped by the influx of imported intellectual and religious traditions.

Finally, and as importantly, what also contributed to the processes of revaluation was the original function and form of the particular deity and his worship. Thus, for example, the god Sin was especially receptive to those ideas which could be linked to those already part of his mythology, ritual and spheres of divine power; and as a result, he gradually took on the characteristics not only of other Moon gods, but of those deities associated with prophecy and the revelation of knowledge. It is in part for this reason that modern scholars have been able to detect in the accounts of the syncretistic religious traditions of communities like the medieval Harranians apparent traces of Chaldaean, Semitic, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Buddhist and gnostic systems. At the same time, however, we must be careful not to overvalue the effects of religious syncretism, for as we shall see, it was often at best an intellectual exercise on the part of a few which left untouched the actual ritual and cult.

Greek Philosophers and the Traditions of Wisdom

It was not only the rites and practices of the gods that were so transformed: Greek intellectuals displayed the same syncretistic tendencies, seeking out the similarities and parallels between their own world views and those of the people whose rulers they had become. The search for the cosmic glue had been an essential part of Greek philosophy from the time of the pre-Socratics; to what end this knowledge might be put was a matter of debate among those in late antiquity who thought they had discovered it. By the end of the first century B.C.E., not only had eclecticism become the hallmark of the various schools of Greek philosophy, but these philosophies had been so heavily influenced by the multiple layers of sacred and scientific traditions of the East that it often becomes difficult to distinguish between religious sect and philosophical school.

The doctrines of the mystery cults and a Near Eastern wisdom regarded as esoteric by at least some Greeks blended together to change the direction of later Hellenistic philosophy. It was not all alien territory: the mystery religions were not a late foreign import to Greece; as early as the mid-second millennium B.C.E., some sort of initiatory ritual had been performed at Eleusis. Esotericism could be found at an early date in Greek philosophy as well: in the sixth

century B.C.E., the followers of Pythagoras had declared that the mysteries of the cosmos could be mastered through number and astronomy, maintaining that the heavenly bodies were divine, moved by the same force that filled the universe and akin to man's own soul.

The eastern source of those sciences was acknowledged early on. That most mystical of philosophers, Pythagoras, was said to have spent 22 years in Egypt, studying astronomy and geometry, before he moved on to the doctrines of the Magi in Babylon. Forming a brotherhood in order to keep secret that knowledge and to honor the memory of their founder, his followers performed esoteric rituals, and followed a prescribed way of life, which included various strictures concerning food and dress. By late antiquity, the Pythagoreans provided an exemplary road map by which the route to cosmic understanding could be traveled; the Hellenistic figure of the philosophical master, part shaman and part prophet, had become a familiar paradigm on the Greek intellectual landscape.

The Graeco-Roman traditions that grew up around the traditions of Berossus are instructive. According to his own account, the author of the *Babyloniaca* was a contemporary of Alexander, a priest of Bel, who had left his native Babylon for Cos sometime after 281 B.C.E. There, he became the first to give formal instruction in "Chaldaean" astrology to the Greeks, and wrote a "history" of the world from the beginning of time. From this barest outline grew the revisionist view of "Chaldaean science" that the Babylonians had observed the heavens for 490,000 years.[18] It was from these Hellenistic beginnings that the legend of the ancient wisdom of the Babylonians grew until by the time of the composition of the *Doctrina Addai*, the term "Chaldaean" had a specific professional meaning, denoting one who foretold the future according to the stars, no matter what his ethnic origin might have been. Although grounded in the observational data of Mesopotamian astronomy, the late antique science of astrology had found a place within a variety of intellectual and popular traditions.[19] The interest of the Stoics in the concepts of cosmic sympathy and *heimarmene* led naturally to a study of the relationship of the heavenly bodies to human behavior, while later

---

[18] Pliny, *N.H.*, VII.

[19] A. Dihle, "Astrology in the Doctrine of Bardesanes," *Studia Patristica* XX (1989), 160–168.

Platonism made the stars the abodes of individual souls; for both the orderly arrangement of the heavens was proof of the existence of a divine intelligence that surpassed the power of any divinity. For those, like the gnostics, who rejected the the belief in a benevolent cosmic order and who had as their goal the escape from *heimarmene*, the notions of fatalism and necessity inherent in the doctrines of astrology were proof of the evil nature of the creation.

There is considerable evidence that it was only at the time of the Greek conquest of the Near East that the astral and planetary connections of the Mesopotamian gods began to suppress their other cultic attributes.[20] It is altogether possible that such a recasting was a product meant for export; but whatever the case, this later, primarily astrological, version of Mesopotamian religion does not seem to have taken hold in the indigenous population. To what extent a belief in astrology, even once developed during the Seleucid period and after, was subscribed to in any degree by the native population of Mesopotamia is difficult to determine; but to some, at least, it posed a distinct threat, as witnessed by the apostle Addai's denunciation of the "Chaldean arts":

> Be ye indeed also far removed from . . . magic arts, which are without mercy, and from soothsaying and divination, and fortune-tellers and from fate and nativities, in which the erring Chaldaeans boast, and from planets and signs of the zodiac, on which the foolish trust.[21]

Yet, it seemed that the attitudes of at least some Christians were ambivalent, for while the order of the cosmos was indeed proof of Divine Providence, the fatalism implied by a belief in astrology denied the possibility of human free will and responsibility; but clearly even those well-situated within the ecclesiastical hierarchy were evidently not beyond the appeal of these older traditions. Although the 5th century bishop of nearby Tella, Sophronius, may have been accused of having participated "in the table of devils, of the abominable calculations, of the motions of the stars, of error and divination, and of pagan prognostications," in the end, it was for his Nestorianism, and not his dabbling in the occult, that he was condemned by the Council of Chalcedon.

---

[20] See, e.g., J. Bidez, *Les Mages Hellenises* (Paris, 1938).
[21] *The Teaching of Addaeus, the Apostle*, ANF VIII, 661.

Hermes Trismegistus and the Hermetic Tradition

One of the most complex products of this syncretistic process of cross-cultural identification, appearing first in Egypt and then diffused in Near Eastern intellectual circles in the first three centuries C.E., is the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, Hermes thrice great, Hermes who knows the past, the present and the future. Constructed from the complex functions and nature of the Egyptian Thoth, and drawing upon the similar roles of Hermes, Nebo, Sin and other deities whose spheres of power encompassed the revelation of hidden wisdom, Hermes Trismegistus was the inspiration for, and putative author of, a vast body of literature comprised of two seemingly dissimilar parts: treatises of philosophical and scientific revelation about the nature of the cosmos, and handbooks of practical magic, with recipes for drawing down the power of the planets and the stars, curing illness, making talismans and amulets and the like. Hermes Trismegistus was the source of all knowledge previously known only to the gods: the explicator of the stars, the sacred healer, the master alchemist.

Although this complex of theosophy and practical knowledge of the esoteric arts that we call Hermeticism does not begin to emerge as a clearly recognizable entity until the late Hellenistic period, its origins are to be found in the variegated patterns of antique esoteric thought and religious practice: the ancient magical and religious traditions of Egypt and Mesopotamia; the quest of Greek science for the cosmic glue; the religious philosophy of Pythagoras and his disciples, of Plato and his successors, and of the Stoic doctrines of fate and universal *sympatheia*; the rites of the mystery cults of Asia Minor and beyond; the astral and planetary worship of the Semites that found a home in both Greek philosophy and the westernized cult of Mithra, as well as the dualism of Persian Zoroastrianism; and finally, the figure of the savior-messiah that emerged within Hellenistic Judaism. The mystical powers of Hermes exerted themselves far beyond the pagan world of late antiquity, transmuting medieval Christian and Islamic understanding of the relationship between rational knowledge and revelation.

As the Greek messenger of the gods who became the conductor of the souls of the dead to the underworld, the playful child-like spirit of fertility who became the companion of triple-faced Hecate and a patron of the magical arts, Hermes had been identified by the Greeks from Herodotus on with the Egyptian god Thoth, whom

Plato in the *Phaedrus* had credited with being the inventor of the alphabet and the art of memory. Thoth was the master of wisdom, made manifest in the moon, the divine scribe, "the tongue of Ptah," who recorded the judgments of the dead; and he thus finds his Mesopotamian counterpart in both the moon god Sin, whose functions we have previously described and Nebo (Babylonian Nabu), the scribe of the gods, recorder of divine decrees upon the face of the moon and the holder of "the tablets of destiny."

The great variety of theories and practices included under the heading of "Hermetic" literature makes it impossible to describe Hermeticism as a coherent and unified doctrine; it is, as Drijvers says, a state of mind rather than a religion.[22] Nevertheless, although the original provenance of the tracts that comprise the *Corpus Hermeticum* is still a matter of debate (Greek vs. native Egyptian), the works clearly represent the unconventional marriage of later Greek philosophy with the occultic, religious and intellectual traditions of the ancient Near East, thus demonstrating to what an extent different interpetations of reality had begun to merge at the end of antiquity.

The technical vocabularies of all of these esoteric scientific disciplines encompassed in Hermeticism, such as alchemy and astrology, bear a close resemblance to each other, and to those of the more "rational" sciences as well; thus, it is possible to see a common scientific terminology shared not only by the "technical" *Hermetica* but with mathematics and biology as well. Veiled in the language of mystical inscrutability, both revelatory texts and magical *practica* had identical goals: to provide an illuminating *gnosis*, both of the cosmos and one's true inner being.

The *gnosis* was one that had been accessible in a primordial past, but now either forgotten or beyond human reach; and the Hermetic tracts often culminated in an ecstatic revelation of the hidden powers of the cosmos, over which one might gain spiritual mastery while at the same time liberating one's essence from its terrestrial bonds, with the help of a celestial guide. "If you wish to see Him, think on the Sun, think on the course of the Moon, think on the order of the stars."[23]

Such an understanding of spiritual illumination clearly struck a

---

[22] Drijvers, "Bardaisan of Edessa and the Hermetica," 196.
[23] *Poimandres*, 5.3.

responsive chord among at least some of the mystic philosophers of late antiquity, which perhaps explains why they were so often found around the fringes of the more radical Hermetic movement; one of the most important bonds between many later Pythagoreans and Platonists and the Hermeticists was a belief in the power of a form of magic grounded in a knowledge of the true workings of the cosmos, called theurgy. Theurgy may be described as magic with a higher religious purpose, having as its source and moving force divine revelation. Its practice had a dual goal: the immediate benefit was manipulation of the present, an unveiling of the past and a divination of the future; but more importantly, perhaps, through the performance of theurgic rituals, its practitioners were able to escape the bonds of *heimarmene*, as reflected in ordered arrangements of the heavens, and thus gain spiritual and intellectual mastery of the cosmos.

The first person whom we know to have called himself a theurgist was the second century C.E. Julianus, called by Suidas the son of a "Chaldaean philosopher," and the putative author of a collection of magical formulae for the evocation of the gods called the *Chaldaean Oracles*. Like Hermetic magic in general, theurgy was based on the principle of cosmic *sympatheia*, a term which drew its meaning from Stoic teachings. Every celestial being, including the planetary deities, was said to have its *symbolon*, or natural representation in the animal, vegetable, and mineral world; and by placing the particular *symbolon* within an image of the deity and by its invocation through prescribed spells, the practitioner could animate the icon and compel it to reveal every kind of hidden knowledge.

Although Plotinus, the third century C.E. founder of Neoplatonism, had experienced ecstatic union with the One through contemplation alone, his biographer and successor, Porphyry, sought through the practice of theurgy a surer route to an experience of the divine. After the death of his master, he produced a commentary on the work of Julianus, revealing his conviction that the ritual practices (*telestike*) of theurgy could purify the *pneumatike psyche* (pneumatic soul); almost as a pious afterthought, he warned that the practice was a dangerous one and potentially wicked. By the fifth century, however, all philosophic caution had been thrown to the wind. When the head of the Academy, Proclus, praised theurgy as "a power higher than all human wisdom, embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation, and in a word all

the operations of divine possession,"[24] it was clear that philosophy had now become not only a way of redemption, but a means of mastering powers that previously had been thought to belong to the divine alone.

The earliest history of the Hermetic tradition is impossible to establish with any clarity, but perhaps one of the most important links in the chain of transmission of Hermetic lore in the Near East was the teachings of Bar Daysan of Edessa (154–222 C.E.), whose biography reflects the eclectic quality of intellectual and religious life in late antiquity. He is said variously to have been educated in the Edessan royal court with the future king Abgar the Great, where, in the traditions of the Parthian nobility, he learned to excel in archery, or to have received his training at Hierapolis, from a priest who instructed him in the esoteric knowledge of the pagan traditions.

According to the *Chronicle* of Michael Syrus, he was converted to Christianity and began composing anti-pagan treatises, but unable to conform to church doctrine, he eventually apostasized from his new faith. Credited with works on astrology and ethnohistory as well as more than 150 hymns, Bar Daysan was, according to Eusebius, a "most able man" and "powerful disputant in the Syriac language."[25] Ephrem remarked upon the "the dirt of the wiles of Bar Daysan," but also conceded that he was "found to speak with subtlety." His various interests reveal the increasingly blurred distinction between religion and philosophy, for it is reported by Ephrem that he founded his own sect whose members gathered in caves to sing psalms and study texts. According to Ibn al-Nadim, who claimed that there were still scattered communities in China and Khurasan, Bar Daysan's followers had been settled in the marshlands between Wasit and Basra.[26]

Bar Daysan's world view must have been reflective of the general character of at least one branch of Greek philosophy at that time, for it is reported that he sent his son to study at the academies in Athens. It was clear to at least some of his critics that Bar Daysan had learned his heresy from Hellas, and that Ephrem still found it necessary to attack his views more than a hundred years after the philosopher's death points to the continued vitality of the tradition.[27]

---

[24] Proclus, *Theology of Plato*, 63.
[25] Eusebius, *E.H.*, IV.30.1.
[26] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 806.
[27] Ephrem Syrus, *Adversus Haereses*, XIV.

Bar Daysan was credited by the *Catalog* of Ibn al-Nadim with a number of works, including *The Light and the Darkness* and *The Spirituality of the Truth*. His *Book of the Laws of Countries* as well as some fragments preserved in the works of Ephrem and the eighth century Christian theologian Theodore bar Konai provide the clearest expositions of his teachings; pointing to the parallels that can be drawn between Bar Daysan and the Hermetic tractate *Poimandres*, Drijvers has argued convincingly that the soteriology, cosmology, anthropology, and theology of Bar Daysan are all consonant with the Hermetic world view.[28] Most interesting from the point of view of this inquiry, Bar Daysan argued that at the creation of this world, the seven planets were assigned fixed places and put in charge of its governance, a world view imputed some 700 years later to the Harranians.[29]

Although there is no direct reference in his surviving writings to Hermes Trismegistus or any of the other figures associated with the Hermetic Corpus, Bar Daysan must have been aware of the tradition, given the prominence both of Nebo at Edessa and the Moon god at Harran; and his eclecticism is indicative not only of the variety of positions of late antique philosophy on issues of fate, the human soul and the nature of the cosmos, but also of a decidedly Hermetic belief in the possibility of salvation through knowledge. A Hermetic world view as formulated by Bar Daysan, both as a pagan phenomenon and as reflected in the doctrines of many of those whom orthodox Christians regarded as heretics, had survived the official victory of the Church. Ephrem anachronistically accused the philosopher of being the "Babylonian Mani," who "went through the door, although unwillingly, that Bar Daysan had opened."[30] His teachings survived the coming of Islam as well, for sometime after the Muslim conquest of the city, Jacob, Bishop of Edessa (d.708 C.E.), made mention of a disciple of Bar Daysan who spoke with erudition on fate and the influence of the planets.

There is, unfortunately, no figure like Bar Daysan at Harran during this period to provide us with a similar insight into Harranian intellectual life. Nevertheless, it is not improbable to suppose that

---

[28] Drijvers, "Bardaisan of Edessa and the Hermetica."

[29] Bardaisan of Edessa, *The Book of the Laws of Countries*, ed. and trans. H.J.W. Drijvers (Assen, Netherlands, 1965), 14.

[30] Ephrem Syrus, *Prose Refutations* I.

Harran was a likely location for the development of a local Hermetic tradition during this period, given its geographical position at the meeting place of a variety of cultures as well as its clear associations with Sin and the continued importance of the god's oracle. That Ephrem mentions Hermes is evidence that had at least some knowledge of a localized tradition.[31] It is also possible that Bar Daysan might have offered his own Hermetic interpretation of the sanctuary at Sumatar Harabesi. The powers of the Moon god were easily translated into those of the Hermetic prophet. The planetary deities played an essential role in both the theoretical and practical sides of Hermeticism, and the religious traditions of the city must have provided fertile ground for its growth.

The practice of *theurgia* was just one concrete expression of the doctrine of cosmic sympathy among the Neoplatonic and Pythagorean sages of late antiquity. Astrology and alchemy also based their theory and technique upon the interconnectedness of the terrestrial and celestial worlds. "Truth it is, without falsehood, certain and most true, that which is above is like to that which is below and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing." So Hermes Trismegistus had revealed in *The Emerald Table*.[32]

Like other branches of the esoteric sciences, alchemy was a form of revealed knowledge that had both its spiritual goals and practical applications. Alchemy as an esoteric science thus becomes a means of transformation, not only of matter but of the essence of the human soul. So argued the 4th century C.E. Zosimus of Panopolis:

> A serpent is stretched out guarding the temple. Let his conqueror begin by sacrifice, then skin him, and after having removed his flesh to the very bones, make a stepping stone of it to enter the temple. Mount upon it and you will find the object sought. For the priest, at first a man of copper, has changed his color and nature and become a man of silver; a few days later, if you wish, you will find him changed into a man of gold.[33]

---

[31] S. Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning," *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. N. Garsoian *et al.* (Dunbarton Oaks, 1982), 19.

[32] "Tabula Smaragdina," trans. R. Steele and D.W. Singer in *Alchemy*, E.J. Holmyard (London, 1957).

[33] *Of Virtue*, "Lesson Two," in *Collection des anciens alchemistes grecs*, texte grec, ed. J. Berthelot (Paris, 1888), 107–112.

From such a perspective, turning base metal into gold may be the surface aim of alchemy but not its hidden one, for the *practica* of alchemy merely serve as the means to accomplish a spiritual transformation from copper to gold. In this view, then, the soul is a substance that needs to be purified, dissolved and recrystallized in order to reach its final perfect, golden state. Such alchemical language then serves as a metaphor for the refinement of man's baser essence into pure spirituality, and metallurgy becomes an analogy between the outward realm of metals and the inward realm of the soul, thereby demonstrating the unity of existence.

Alchemy drew upon a belief common to astrology not only in the powers of the planets, especially the sun and the moon, but in the cosmic bond between them and terrestrial matter. Gold and silver are seen as the earthly reflections of the sun and the moon, for they are all products of the same reality. The sun is not merely represented by gold, but rather both are symbols of the same cosmic oneness. The association of the celestial bodies with various metals can be found in Mesopotamia as early as the 16th century B.C.E., on a magic tablet from Nippur which contains 60 symbols and their divine significance and which is "not to be shown to the uninitiated;"[34] and in the construction of the ziggurat at Borsippa, called "the House of the seven directions of heaven and earth," which was built in seven stages, each tinted a different color, to represent a ruling planet.

Such links between microcosm and macrocosm became part of the teachings not only of the mystery cults, such as that of the Persian Mithra, but of later Greek philosophy as well. It was a view adopted by at least some of the Neoplatonists, who posited the geological theory that metals were formed inside the earth by the action of the rays of the seven planets; Proclus, in his commentary on the *Timaeus*, declared, "Gold and silver and every metal, like other substances, grow in the earth under the influence of the celestial gods and their emanations."[35]

The investigation by the Greek scientists from the pre-Socratics on into the nature of matter and the processes of change provided a rationalist underpinning for the theories of alchemy; there were a

---

[34] J. R. Partington, "The Origins of the Planetary Symbols for the Metals," *Ambix* I, no.1 (May 1937), 61–63.

[35] Proclus, *In Timaeum Comm.*, 24b (I.43.1).

number of late antique treatises on the subject ascribed to Democritus and Aristotle. It was perhaps an honest error; after all, Democritus was supposed to have declared that "nature and instruction are similar; for instruction transforms the man, and in transforming creates his nature," and Aristotle had written that "techniques are a copy of nature; it is all the same whether the processes take place in kitchen utensils or in the organs of plants and animals."[36] It was an easy conclusion to reach that they both had been formulators of the secret science.

Although the ascription of some of these works to earlier Greek philosophers may have been a way of asserting a Hellenic lineage to alchemy, other interpretations of its history could be found as well: Isis, Thoth and Cleopatra, Moses and Miriam, and Ostanes the Mage and Zoroaster, were all said to be authors of alchemical treatises. The hybrid nature of the tradition is illustrated by two historical personages of late antiquity: Zosimus, and Stephanos of Alexandria (7th century C.E.). The work of Zosimus, who composed in "enigmatic and elusive language" an encyclopaedia of alchemy, reflects the influence of Egyptian magic, gnosticism, Babylonian astrology, Christian theology (perhaps a later interpolation), and pagan myth.[37] We know little about the background of Zosimus, but the public career of Stephanos is instructive. A professor of philosophy in Alexandria, he lectured on mathematics, music and astronomy, and composed a commentary on Aristotle, in addition to his treatise on the art of alchemy, which he dedicated to the emperor Heraclius.

That a wide variety of religious and intellectual traditions continued to thrive in both Harran and Edessa even after the Muslim conquest may be illustrated by a story recorded in the *Chronicle* of Bar Hebraeus. According to this account, a man named Bashir appeared at Harran in 736 C.E., claiming to be Tiberius, the son of the Byzantine emperor, Justinian II. In order to prove his identity, Bashir called upon the necromantic powers of the Jews to summon his ancestors, and asked the pagans of Harran to play the role of *haruspices*, and examine liver omens. The Muslim authorities, perhaps for their own reasons, supported his claim, and he received

---

[36] Aristotle, *Meteorologica* IV.
[37] E.J. Holmyard, *Alchemy* (London, 1957), 27.

royal treatment by the Christians of Edessa before he was exposed as a fraud and executed.[38]

Although the syncretistic and synthetic processes did operate at every level of Near Eastern culture, it is evident that these processes occur most completely among those for whom historical necessity, political expediency or spiritual justification makes a compelling argument. We have already considered the first two causes; we must now turn to the last and most complex. Having laid the groundwork for the existence of these traditions at Harran, we must now search for evidence of their persistence.

---

[38] Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Bar Hebraeus*, ed. and trans. E.A. Wallis Budge (Oxford, 1932), 110.

CHAPTER FOUR

HARRAN AFTER THE MUSLIM CONQUEST: MUSLIMS AND SABIANS

Historical Backgrounds: 640–1271 C.E.

It was the pagans of Harran who negotiated the peaceful surrender of their city to the Muslim army of ʿIyadh ibn Ghanam in late 639 or early 640 C.E.;[1] perhaps their antipathy toward this new faith called Islam was not as strong as that of the Christians in the city; perhaps it was merely revenge against their Christian neighbors; perhaps old rivalries had been stirred up once again. According to Baladhuri's account, the conqueror negotiated separatedly with the Christian and pagan communities at Harran, and the latter offered to surrender if the pagans of Edessa could be persuaded to yield on similar terms, and provided that the Christians were to be excluded from this agreement.[2] Perhaps the pagans of the city merely did what at least some of their Christian neighbors had been contemplating. The hostility of Monophysite Christians in Mesopotamia and Syria toward orthodox Constantinople was at least as great as toward the armies of Islam. More generally, it is likely that discontent among both pagans and Christians with Byzantine rule made the Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia so easy.

Whatever the Christians may have felt toward Muslim rule, however, it is clear that at least some Muslims felt more comfortable among the pagans of Harran. The city became a center of the Bedouin tribe of Qays, who had lived in Syria before the appearance of the Muslims and who before their conversion to Islam, had been star worshippers; perhaps the old paganism of Harran provided a more familiar setting. Tribal rivalries played a major role in the history of early Islam, and the old religious antagonisms died hard. The *Banu Qays* in Harran had supported Muʿawiya, the Ummayad caliph, in his struggle against the supporters of ʿAli, but when the Ummayads won the support of the *Banu Kalb*, an Arab clan that had

---

[1] Baladhuri, *Futuḥ al-Buldan*, 174.

[2] See also, Yaqut in Chwolsohn II, 550.

been Christian, the *Banu Qays* turned against them. As a result, Harran changed hands between local rival Muslim factions several times before the end of the seventh century.

The Ummayad rulers had made it a custom to reside elsewhere than in their capital of Damascus, although the administrative bureaus remained there. But, in 744 C.E., Marwan II, the last of the Ummayad caliphs, made Harran not only the site of his court but the administrative center of the caliphate as well, in part, as some have suggested, because of the strong anti-Christian posture of its pagan inhabitants; in part because he had decided that he needed the support of the *Banu Qays* in his struggle to maintain the power of the Umayyads. It was from Harran in 750 C.E. that Marwan set out to meet the ᶜAbbasid army, and the historian Tabari records that after his defeat, the palace that he had built at Harran was looted and destroyed by the victors.[3]

Despite the fact that Harran was so closely identified with the last of the Ummayads, the ᶜAbbasid caliph, Abu Jaᶜfar al-Manṣur (754–775 C.E.), clearly did not hold a grudge. By his order, the walls of all the cities in Northern Mesopotamia were torn down; only Harran and Maipherqat to the east were spared. Soon after, the caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809 C.E.) constructed a canal from the Jullab river to Harran in order to insure an adequate water supply. Despite the generosity of the two caliphs, however, the city continued to play the unfortunate role as pawn in the factional struggles of the Muslims until the time of its destruction.

It was not only the Muslims who made the area their battleground for disputes. Although the Muslim conquest had seemed complete, it was several centuries before the Byzantines gave up their hopes of regaining Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. During the reign of Leo VI (886–912 C.E.), they began an offensive drive south and east through Anatolia, a move that only brought Muslim reprisal in the form of raids on Byzantine territory. In 942 C.E., the Byzantines were ready to try again, and this time they were successful. Sweeping through Anatolia, the Byzantine general, John Curcuas, entered Mesopotamia and in short order took Amida and Nisibis; by 944 C.E. he was outside the walls of Edessa. John declared that he and his troops would depart only if the holy *mandylion*, the cloth

---

[3] Tabari, *Annals*, III.45.

said to bear the miraculous imprint of the face of Jesus, were handed over to him.

To the Muslims of the city, at least, it seemed a small price to pay, and the holy relic was transported to Constantinople, despite the protests of the Christian community of Edessa. In return for this remarkable prize, the siege was lifted, and a treaty of perpetual peace was declared between the Byzantines and the cities of Edessa, Sarug, Samosata and Harran. This treaty of perpetual peace was quickly broken when hostilities erupted soon after in 949 C.E.; for the next thirty years Byzantine armies made forays into Mesopotamia, Palestine and Syria as Muslim forces did the same into Anatolia. Once again, the regions around Harran and Edessa were devastated as the Byzantines swept through to capture Damascus, Aleppo, Acre, Nazareth and Caesarea.

For the inhabitants of Northern Mesopotamia, the only consequences of these seasonal campaigns were famine and prolonged hardship. Although the Byzantines did manage to gain a foothold in the cities, they were never able to recapture the countryside which remained under Muslim control. And at the end of the same century, danger, in the form of the Egyptian Fatimid dynasty, appeared from the south, threatening to upset the delicate balance of power. The armies of the Fatimid caliph Ḥakim crossed the Euphrates, and are reported by some to have reached the land around Harran and Edessa and laid waste to it, although it is not clear that they entered the city. Dimashqi maintained that the last temple of the moon god at Harran was destroyed by the Fatimids in 1032 C.E.,[4] but there is little corroborative evidence; in fact, Dimashqi himself elsewhere in the same chapter contradicts his own statement.

At the time, both Harran and Edessa were under the control of the Numayrids, a sub-clan of the *Banu Qays*. The Numayrids, who were one of a number of petty dynasties that had established themselves in the Jazirah and Northern Syria at the end of the 10th century in the absence of more powerful forces, were based in Harran but extended their power over the *Diyar Mudar*, the territory between Sarug, Harran and Raqqah. In 990 C.E. Waththab ibn Ṣabiq al-Numayri, the founder of the dynasty, made himself ruler of

---

[4] Dimashqi, *Kitab Nukhbat al-Dahr fi ʿAjaʾib al-Barr wa-al-Bahr (Cosmographie)*, ed. C.M.J. Fraehn and A.F. Mehren (St. Petersburg, 1866), I.10.2.; Chwolsohn II, 413.

Harran and Sarug, and in 1007 C.E. conquered Raqqah. It was his son, Shabib ibn Waththab, who negotiated a treaty with the Fatimid army, recognizing their suzerainty and swearing allegiance to the caliph, all the while continuing to do business with the Byzantines.

Waththab had also annexed Edessa, giving it to his cousin as a fief, and within a few years, rival Numayrid factions were struggling for control of the city. In 1030 C.E., an appeal was made by one side to a rival Bedouin prince of Mawsil, Naṣr al-Dawlah, who took the city, divided it in two and gave a half each to two Numayrid leaders. Ibn ʿUtair, who had received the citadel, sold his share to the Byzantines, who then staged raids on cities in the vicinity, including Harran. The Muslim princes manipulated the Byzantines for their own political purposes, for although Shabib ibn Waththab joined them in an expedition against Naṣr al-Dawlah, in the end, he proved to be an untrustworthy ally. Joining with Naṣr in an attempt to drive the Greeks from Edessa in 1036 C.E., he laid siege to the city. Although they took Edessa, their forces were unable to dislodge the Byzantine garrison from the citadel; and when the Seljuk Turks threatened from the east in 1037 C.E., the preoccupied Ibn Waththab gave the whole of it back to the Byzantines.

The actual appearance of the Seljuks around 1045 C.E. merely increased the level of violence; ultimately, however, neither Numayrid and Byzantine were unable to resist their power. With the defeat of the Byzantine emperor Romanus Diogenes by the Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan at the battle of Manzikert in 1071, any dreams of a continued Greek presence in northern Mesopotamia were effectively destroyed. Ruined, too, was the power of the Fatimids in the region, for although the Numayrids had eventually acknowledged the suzerainty of the Fatimids, the Egyptians were of little help in holding off the Seljuks.

In 1081 C.E., Harran was occupied by the Bedouin Sharaf al-Dawlah, an ally of the Seljuk Turks, who installed as governor his supporter, Yaḥya ibn al-Shatir, a man said to have once been the slave of a Numayrid. According to Ibn Shaddad, it was al-Shatir who destroyed the moon temple that had been built for the Sabians by the Muslim conqueror of the city, Ibn Ghanam, in the 7th century. Although Constantinople maintained the fiction of Christian control of Edessa for as long as was possible, in 1087 C.E. the armies of the Turkish Sultan took over the city. Even when the Turks were driven out of Edessa in 1095 C.E., the inhabitants remained

isolated, surrounded and besieged by Turkish garrisons at Harran, Amida, Samasota and Sarug.

It was perhaps out of political desperation that in 1098 C.E. the Edessan governor, the Armenian Thoros, summoned Baldwin, Frankish leader of the First Crusade, who was stationed with his troops on the banks of the Euphrates. Adopted by Thoros and made co-ruler, Baldwin was offered marriage to the daughter of an Armenian prince. The Edessan nobility soon regretted their invitation. Thoros was killed by an angry mob, and the local power structure was soon displaced politically, socially and economically by the Franks.

The 40 year quixotic history of the Frankish County of Edessa lies outside the scope of this study; and in any event, Harran remained under Muslim control, despite multiple attempts by the Franks to take the city. In 1104 C.E., Crusader armies under the command of Tancred of Antioch and Bohemund gathered at Edessa, now under the rule of Baldwin's cousin and namesake, in order to remove the Turkish threat from Harran. The Crusaders had plundered the land around Harran, and the Muslim inhabitants, cut off from any hope of relief, offered the keys of the city in surrender to Baldwin. It was perhaps at this time that the Crusaders diverted the waters of the Jullab river,[5] but it is more likely that this did not happen until after the destruction of the city.

According to William of Tyre's *History of the Crusades*, Baldwin refused the offer, fearful lest such a prize corrupt the discipline of his troops. His delay allowed the Turks to rally their forces, and by a surprise counterattack they killed a large number of the Crusaders who had come out from Edessa. Baldwin and his kinsman, Joscelyn de Courtenay, were taken prisoner, and those soldiers who had not been killed or taken captive by the Turks were set upon by the Harranians. It was only quarreling among the Turkish leaders that saved Edessa from immediate capture.

Succeeding Turkish commanders used Harran as a staging area from which to harass and besiege the Franks, waiting for the opportune moment to drive them out of Edessa. When finally, in 1144 C.E., some Harranians reported to the Turkish Atabeg of Mosul, Zangi, that Joscelyn, the count of Edessa, had left the city with a

---

[5] J.B.Segal, "Harran and Edessa" (London, 1962), 25.

large number of men, the Turkish leader decided that this was his chance. Marching to Edessa, he besieged the city, which fell about a month later. Two years later, an abortive attempt on the part of the Crusaders to retake the city ended in failure with the sack of the city and the slaughter of 30,000 of its inhabitants. It was the end of Christian Edessa, and they blamed Harran for their sorrows:

> The people of Harran and the rest of its enemies excavated the churches and the houses of the nobles, saying, Bravo, Bravo! Our eye has contemplated it.[6]

Zangi was assassinated in 1146 C.E., but his successors rewarded the Harranians for their support. An earthquake some 30 years earlier had severely damaged the city, and the son of Zangi, Nur al-Din, who took control of the city in 1149 C.E., not only rebuilt and enlarged the Friday Mosque, which, according to Ibn Shaddad, stood on the site of an ancient Sabian temple, but also built a *madrasa*, or law school, and a hospice; the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Edessa, now badly deterioated, was torn down, and its fabric removed to the mosque at Harran. Muẓaffar al-Din Abu Saʿid Gökbüri, who had received the city as a fief from his brother-in-law Saladin in 1181 C.E., built a hospital; his overlord, founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, greatly enlarged and beautified the Great Mosque of Harran, which had probably been damaged in yet another earthquake in 1157 C.E. In 1191 C.E., Saladin handed over Harran to his brother, al-Malik al-ʿAdil, who rebuilt the citadel.

Whatever efforts its Muslim rulers had made to beautify Harran and despite the claim by Ibn Shaddad that it was the chief city of the region, the setting of the city remained desolate. When Ibn Jubayr visited the area in 1184 C.E., he described the surrounding countryside:

> Harran is a town with no beauty around it. . . Thrown into the naked waste, it has been founded in the midst of the wilderness and, without the brightness of a city, its shoulders have been stripped of the clothing of verdure.[7]

---

[6] Michael Syrus, *Chronique*, ed. and trans. J.B. Chabot, (Paris, 1899–1924), III.272.

[7] Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, ed. and trans. W. Wright and M.J. de Goeje, (London, 1907), 246.

The city was now seemingly well-fortified, but in 1234 C.E. it was briefly occupied by the Seljuks and then by the Khwarizmians, the Turkish rulers of Transoxania, who were fleeing before the advances of the Mongols. The Ayyubids retook the city in 1240 C.E. and made it part of the province of Aleppo, but Harran's three thousand year history was nearing its end. The Mongols appeared at the city's gates in 1259 C.E., and Harran surrendered peacefully to the brother of the Great Khan, Hulagu, who destroyed the citadel and part of the city wall.

The defeat of the Mongols by the Mamluk forces of the Sultan Baybars, however, placed Harran briefly under the control of the Egyptians. Although the Mongols retook the city in 1262 C.E., they were constantly harassed by Bedouin forces loyal to the Sultan, who in 1271 C.E. sent a force led by ʿAlaʾ al-din Taybars across the Euphrates. It is reported that when the Mongols saw their approach, they lay down their weapons and were made prisoner. The Harranians asked Taybars to appoint a governor on their behalf, but he refused. Seeing that they could no longer hold the city, the Mongols

> deported the inhabitants to Mardin and to other towns, destroyed the Friday mosque, walled up the gates of the city and left it an empty shell, but for the birds in their nests.[8]

Harran and the Identity of the Harranians

Introduction

Whatever one may make of the historicity of Maʾmun's exchange with the inhabitants of Harran as recorded by Ibn al-Nadim, the task of defining their beliefs after the Muslim conquest is an intricate and difficult one that must address a series of questions which are, in the minds of many scholars, both medieval and modern, not necessarily related. The first is: who were the Sabians of the *Qurʾan*; the second, who were those medieval inhabitants of Harran who were called Sabians by Muslim authors, and what was the connection, if any, between their beliefs and those attributed in pre-Islamic texts and archaeological evidence to the Harranians? Third, given

---

[8] Ibn Shaddad, in D.S. Rice, "Medieval Harran", *Anatolian Studies* II (1952), 45; cf. D.S. Rice, "A Muslim Shrine at Harran," BSOAS, XVII/3 (1955), 477.

the fact that Muslim writings on the Sabians are drawn from a wide variety of sources, ranging from works on philosophy and history to those that deal with Islamic religious law and theology, we must ask to what extent were these accounts of the Harranians determined by factors other than the revealed word of the *Qurʾan*? And finally, how and why does the name Sabian come to be applied to a great number of groups both within and without the *Dār al-Islam*, and finally come to mean star worshipper? The answers to these questions are not easily determined, for each raises, as we shall see, extraordinarily complex issues of historiographical methodology and ideological perspective.

The Sabians of the Qurʾan: Chwolsohn and his critics

In 1856, Daniel Chwolsohn, the eminent scholar of Semitic languages, published his monumental study, entitled *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*.[9] In the foreword, Chwolsohn wrote that he had become acquainted with the "alleged" Sabians through the accounts of them in the *Moreh Nebukim* (*Guide for the Perplexed*) of Maimonides. The medieval Hebrew philosopher, well acquainted with both biblical and Islamic traditions, viewed them as the adversaries of Abraham, and had described them as worshippers of the stars, whom they considered

> as deities, and the sun as the chief deity. They believe that all the seven stars are gods, but the two luminaries are greater than all the rest. They say distinctly that the sun governs the world, both that which is above and that which is below. . . All the Sabians thus believed in the eternity of the Universe, the heavens being, in their opinion, God.[10]

When Chwolsohn then discovered that the *Catalog* of Ibn al-Nadim contained a chapter dealing exclusively with those same Sabians, he resolved to satisfy his curiosity about their beliefs and practices, collecting in the literature all the references to the Sabians that he could discover. The result of his investigations was a work of more than 1,700 pages, including all the relevant Arabic and Hebrew texts

---

[9] D. Chwolsohn, *Untersuchungen über die Entwicklung der Begriffe Ssabier und Ssabismus, über die Mendaischen Ssabier und unsbesondere über die Geschichte der Harranischen Ssabier und der Stadt Harran*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1856).

[10] *Guide for the Perplexed*, part 3, ch. xxix, trans. M. Friedlander (London, 1904), 315–17.

available to him in the mid-nineteenth century, with translations, extensive commentaries, and a detailed analysis of the questions posed above.

Chwolsohn's inquiry and analysis focused on the same two questions already raised above, namely, the identity of the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* and the nature of the beliefs of the Harranians. His conclusions were the following:

1. In the *Catalog* (chapter nine, section one), Ibn al-Nadim describes a sect called *al-Mughtasila* ("those who wash themselves"), or *al-Ṣabat al-Baṭaʾiḥ* ("Sabians of the marshes"), who live in the swampy regions around Wasit and Basra, practice ritual ablution, and whose founder was someone called al-Ḥasiḥ. This account corresponds to a passage found in the *Refutation of Heresies* of Hippolytus (c. 170–236 C.E.),[11] in which a man called Elchasai (i.e., al-Ḥasiḥ) came from Parthia, bringing with him a book containing an angelic revelation, and gave it to a man called Sobiai.

Traditionally, Elchasai was said to be a righteous man who announced a new path to redemption in the third year of the reign of Trajan. According to Hippolytus, his followers subscribed to the god of Judaism and a docetist view of Christ, who was, they claimed, reincarnated in Elchasai; they rejected the earlier prophets, but followed the Mosaic law, including circumcision and the observation of the sabbath, emphasizing especially the redeeming nature of baptism, for water is the source of life.

Chwolsohn concluded that these followers of al-Ḥasiḥ, or the Elkesaites, were, in fact, Mandaeans, a remnant of whom still make their home in the marshes of the lower Euphrates and Tigris. This gnostic sect practices the sacraments of baptism in flowing water and the eating of a sacred meal, and subscribe to a radically dualistic theology in which *Hayye* (Life) or *Mara Drabuta* (Master of Greatness) stands in opposition to *Malka Dhusaka* (King of Darkness).[12]

Definition of Mandaean belief in its earliest form is difficult because through the centuries various accretions to their literature and practices have blurred the outlines of their teachings, but certain ideals seem to have remained constant. Believing that the Zodiac

---

[11] Chwolsohn mistakenly attributed its authorship to Origen.

[12] See E.S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Oxford, 1937), and K. Rudolph, *Mandeism* (Leiden, 1978).

and the planets were the creation of evil spirits, they thus pay careful attention to the heavenly bodies in order avoid their baneful influence. The goal of their ritual is to insure that the soul, made pure through baptism, will, after death, survive its journey to the celestial world, traveling past the dangerous influences of the demon-infested planetary spheres.

Chwolsohn believed that the Elkesaites, and therefore the Mandaeans, were identical to the Sabians who are mentioned in the *Qurʾan*, since he argued that the name Sabian comes from the Aramaic root *ṣaba*, to dip or baptize, and that the principal rite of the Mandaeans is baptism. Indeed, Chwolsohn's conviction that the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* were really Mandaeans is made clear from the full title of his work: *Untersuchungen über die Entwicklung der Begriffe Ssabier und Ssabismus, über die Mendaischen Ssabier und unsbesondere über die Geschichte der Harranischen Ssabier und der Stadt Harran.*

2. Those inhabitants of Harran who called themselves Sabians had done nothing more than construct "a tissue of lies" in order to protect themselves from forced conversion to Islam, for the religion that they practiced was nothing more than traditional semitic paganism, grounded in the worship of planetary deities. Their claim to have a revealed book and a prophet was a deceit constructed solely to mislead the Muslim authorities; the references in Muslim sources to Harranian worship of the stock characters of the Hermetic tradition, such as the Agathodaimon, the planetary spirits, and the like, are merely proof of how well the pagan Harranians deceived their Muslim rulers.
3. Finally, since star worship played such an important role in the ancient pre-Islamic religion of the Harranians, the term Sabian came to be applied as a generic name for star-worshipper or even pagan.

Chwolsohn pointed out that the name Sabian does not appear in Greek, Roman or Byzantine sources, but is a term found only in the writings of Muslims, or of those non-Muslims living in Islamic lands and writing in Arabic. Dividing up the sources into three distinct periods, he maintained that, in the earliest period of Qurʾanic exegesis, Muslim commentators clearly understood the name Sabian to mean Mandaean. It was only after 830 C.E., in the years following Maʾmun's visit to Harran, Chwolsohn argued, that the name began to be applied to the pagan inhabitants of Harran as well as to the Mandaeans. It was in this period, then, that, due to the extreme

gullibility of the Muslim authorities, the Harranian pagans were able to pass themselves off as the Sabians of the *Qurʾan*.

The third stage of Muslim interpretation began in the eleventh century, when the Sabians became identified, as Maimonides had done, with the pagans of Harran whom the patriarch Abraham had encountered; it is at this point that the term Sabian comes to take on its generalized meaning of pagan and begins to be applied to such a great variety of non-Muslim sects living within the Muslim world as to become meaningless.

While it cannot be denied that Chwolsohn's collection of the available sources and his investigations laid an invaluable foundation for all future scholarship, there are several major difficulties presented by his conclusions about the identity of the Sabians. The first of these is that several texts which have proved crucial in the attempt to identify the nature of Harranian belief and practice were either inaccessible or unknown to him. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the methods—and weaknesses—of Qurʾanic *isnad* had not been clearly delineated in Chwolsohn's time, and thus, he could not be aware of how early or how reliable his sources were.

The third and greatest area of difficulty, however, stemmed from Chwolsohn's own methodology and use of his sources. After characterizing the "so-called" Sabianism of Harran during the period of Muslim rule as the product of an enormous hoax perpetrated by the pagan inhabitants of the city, and simultaneously depicting Muslim authors as extraordinarily naive and even ignorant, Chwolsohn then directed his investigations to proving that the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* were in fact the Mandaeans, and, in the process, disregarded the issue of why, despite this supposedly clear identification in the earliest Islamic traditions, the Harranian pagans could have later became confused with the Sabians (i.e., Mandaeans) of the *Qurʾan*; for even if one were to accept the identification of the Qur'anic Sabians with the Mandaeans, the question of how the label came to be attached to the Harranians would still remain.

Despite his inability to resolve this difficulty, Chwolsohn was undoubtedly correct in pointing out that the original meaning of the term Sabian did not denote pagan, for the *Qurʾan* used the term Sabian in the same sura (22.17) with the word "polytheists" (*mushrikun*), and certainly his argument that the *Qurʾan* refers to a specific group is correct. Indeed, it is on the identification of this particular sect mentioned in the *Qurʾan* that more recent investigation has focused.

Nevertheless, one must note at the outset that whatever group was designated as the Sabians in the *Qurʾan*, the Prophet himself may not have fully understood the practices and beliefs of the people he called by that name.

Certainly, Muḥammad's knowledge of Judaism and Christianity was imperfect; although he recognized them as "People of the Book," he had apparently never explored the texts of either the Torah or the Gospels. It is possible that Muḥammad's interpretation of Christianity and Judaism may have been filtered through the sensibilities of heretical Jewish-Christian sects, although whether native to the vicinity of Mecca and Medina or farther afield in Syria and Iraq is unclear. In fact, A. Sprenger had gone as far as to posit the existence of a community there prior to Muḥammad's revelation, whose holy book was the *ṣuḥuf* ("pages") ascribed to Abraham (*Qurʾan* 87:14), but there is certainly no evidence to support such a supposition.[13] In any event, what later Muslim scholars accounted as pagan or polytheist belief might not have been so considered by Muḥammad. In fact, it is possible that given what is known of the arguments used in his attempts to win over the Jews of Medina, he might have also misinterpreted the beliefs of those people whom he called Sabians.

Objections to Chwolsohn's identification of the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* with the Mandaeans and Elkesaites began to be raised almost immediately. Theodor Noldeke[14] and W. Brandt,[15] among others, pointed out the discrepancies between the practices of the *Mughtasila*, as described by Ibn al-Nadim,[16] and the historic Mandaeans, which supposed connection had formed the foundation of Chwolsohn's identification. Brandt, however, did not deny that the *Mughtasila* might be identified with the Elkesaites, but suggested that although there are similarities between Ibn al-Nadim's account of the *Mughtasila* and Elkesaite beliefs, no clear connection could be established either between them or with the Mandaeans.

The identification of the Elkesaites with the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* had been argued earlier by Dozy and de Goeje,[17] although they,

---

[13] A. Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad* (Berlin, 1869), 45 ff.

[14] T. Nöldeke, *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeiger*, 1, 484 ff. (1869), cited in Pedersen.

[15] W. Brandt, *Elchasai* (Leipzig, 1912), 141–144.

[16] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 811–812.

[17] M.J. de Goeje, "Memoire posthume de M. Dozy contenant de Nouveaux documents pour l'etude de la religion des Harraniens, acheve par M.J. de Goeje," *Travaux de la 6e session du Congress International des Orientalistes* ii (1885), 283–366.

too, saw neither group as identical to the Mandaeans; de Goeje, however, did follow Chwolsohn in maintaining that it was not until the time of Maʾmun that the Harranians adopted the name of Sabian. Julius Wellhausen pointed out that, according to Ibn Hisham (d. 834 C.E.), editor of *The Life of the Prophet* compiled by Muḥammad ibn Ishaq (d. 767 C.E.), the Prophet himself was called a Sabian by his adversaries, and he proposed that the root of the word was related to the Aramaic root, ṣbʾ, meaning to dip (i.e., baptize),[18] arguing that when Muḥammad and his companions were called Sabians, this signified that they washed before prayer in the manner of other baptist sects.[19]

In the article, "Harranians," in the *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*,[20] D.S. Margoliouth presented the following criticisms of Chwolsohn's theory: Chwolsohn was mistaken in relying so heavily on the account of Maʾmun's encounter with the Sabians found in the *Catalog*; citing the historian Tabari, Margoliouth demonstrated, through an analysis of the transmission of the tradition, that the link between Harran and the Sabians had been established at least 75 years prior to Maʾmun's visit. Tabari and his sources,[21] which can be traced back to 770 C.E., had located the Sabians in the Jazirah of Mausil (upper Mesopotamia), which would be approximately accurate for the Harranians, but not the Mandaeans. Furthermore, in the early 10th century, the geographer Istakhri described Harran as the city of the Sabians without the slightest intimation that this connection was less than a century old. Neither of these works, Margoliouth pointed out, was available to Chwolsohn.

Margoliouth adduced as further evidence for the identification of the Harranians as the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* the *Fiṣal w'al-Milal* (*Divisions and Sects*) of the "controversial but decidedly learned writer," Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1063 C.E.), who "has no hesitation in identifying the Harranians with the Sabians of the Koran." In his account, Ibn Ḥazm, haeresiographer, theologian and poet, declared

---

[18] J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin, 1897), 236–237.

[19] Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, 237.

[20] D.S. Margoliouth, "Harranians," *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, VI (1913), 519–520.

[21] Tabari's sources as cited by Margoliouth are Yunus ibn ʿAbd al Aʿla (d.877 C.E.), after ʿAbdallah ibn Wahb (d.812 C.E.), who follows Usamah ibn Zaid (d.770 C.E.).

that Abraham had been sent to convert the *Ṣabiʾah* of Harran, and at that time they adopted the name of *ḥanif* which, in its Qurʾanic context, seems to mean one who practices the pure worship of God. Margoliouth was convinced that the key to the identity of the Sabians in the *Qurʾan* was to be found in the relationship between the name *Ṣabiʾah*, which according to tradition was applied to Muḥammad and his followers, and the term *ḥanif*.

In the *Qurʾan* the latter word is applied to both Abraham (3:67) and Muḥammad; thus, Muḥammad, in calling both himself and Abraham *ḥanif*, implied that he was the restorer of the religion of Abraham (cf. 16.124; 22:77). Ibn Ḥazm maintained that the religion of the Harranians, then, was identical with the religion of Abraham as restored by Muḥammad, except that they had reintroduced the worship of the stars and idols, a practice which Abraham had attempted in vain to abolish. This account, according to Margoliouth, would explain Muḥammad's calling himself a *ḥanif*, and why he was called ṣabiʾ by his enemies, and would imply, of course, that the name *Ṣabiʾah* was applied to the Harranians before the visit of Maʾmun.

Margoliouth's identification was also based on the etymology of the name Ṣabiʾah. Various Muslim authors had attributed it to either an eponymous founder of the group, Ṣabiʾ, a son of Methusaleh, or from the verb *ṣabaʾa* ("he changed his religion"), but Margoliouth thought that Shahrastani was correct in deriving it from *ṣba*, a verb also found in Syriac and signifying "to desire," i.e., to desire knowledge of God. This root has an exact analogy in the Arabic word *muridun*, "aspirants after the knowledge of God," which is assumed by Sufi novices, "and has even been used as the title of a sect."

Margoliouth's explication concerning the work of Ibn Ḥazm rests, of course, on the reliability of that author, and it is legitimate to question whether Ibn Ḥazm is making the connection between Abraham and the Sabians according to a generic definition of pre-Islamic religion when he describes the Sabians in the following way: the Sabians believe in two eternal elements; they honor the seven planets and the twelve constellations, and paint them in their temples; they have five prayers similar to the Muslim ceremony, fast in Ramadan, turn to the Kaʿbah in prayer and regard the same meats as unlawful as do the Muslims.

Citing as evidence such descriptions as well as the fact that

authors such as Masʿudi and Shahrastani treated the Sabians as philosophers rather than as practitioners of a traditional paganism, Margoliouth concluded that the Sabians of Harran were, *pace* Chwolsohn, a gnostic sect, followers of a system, with a particular ritual and structure, and "founded by some person or persons, rather than that their worship was a survival modified by unconscious syncretism." Nevertheless, although he believed that the identification of the Harranians with the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* is found in Muslim sources much earlier than the visit of Maʿmun, Margoliouth ultimately refused to commit himself to whether or not the Harranians were the Sabians of the *Qurʾan*.

In 1922, Johs. Pedersen surveyed all the scholarship since Chwolsohn as well as more recent textual and historical discoveries and likewise disagreed with Chwolsohn's identification of the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* with the Mandaeans.[22] Like Noldeke, Pedersen pointed out that such an identification rested on the equation of that sect which Ibn al-Nadim calls *al-Mughtasila* with the Mandaeans, an equation that, in Pedersen's view, was not at all clear. Pedersen declared that, aside from ceremonial bathing and purification, the two groups have nothing in common. In an analysis of Ibn al-Nadim's account of Manichaeism, he pointed out that Futtuq, Mani's father, after a voice in a pagan temple ordered him to abstain from meat, wine and marriage, was said to have joined the *Mughtasila*, who must have practiced or at least adopted the creed that Futtuq had been ordered to follow. Elsewhere, Ibn al-Nadim declares that the *Mughtasila* "agreed with the Manichaeans about the two elemental [principles], but later their sect became separate."[23] Since the commandments to Futtuq included abstinence from meat and marriage, both of which are permitted by the Mandaeans, it was clear to Pedersen that the *Mughtasila* could not be identified with the Mandaeans.

Pedersen then went on to make a similar argument against an identification with the Elkesaites, who, he maintained, "cannot be Mandaeans," for the Mandaeans worship fire, which for the Elkesaites is an evil element; further proof that the Elkesaites and the

---

[22] J. Pedersen, "The Sabians," *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne on His 60th Birthday*, ed. T.W. Arnold and R.A. Nicholson (Cambridge, 1922), 383–391.

[23] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 811.

Mughtasila cannot be identical is found in the fact that the Elkesaites, unlike the *Mughtasila*, do not forbid marriage. "The Mandaeans and the *Mughtasila* are thus two different sects, and the Elchasaeans are identical with neither of them." Pedersen was correct in arguing that the identification of the Mandaeans with the Elkesaites must be rejected, for there are too many points of doctrine on which they disagree, especially in their views of both Christianity and Mosaic law. The clearest link between the two is the ritual of baptism, which is too widespread a practice to be of significance here.

But Pedersen's sharpest criticism of Chwolsohn's methodology was that "matters are much more complicated than supposed by Chwolsohn." Most importantly, although Chwolsohn himself had located the home of the Mandaeans in the swampland of southern Mesopotamia, he presented no evidence to support a claim that Muḥammad would have had any opportunity to learn about their beliefs (despite the tale contained in Christian apologetic of his encounter with the monk Bahira in Syria). Secondly, like Margoliouth, Pedersen cited the evidence of texts that were not accessible to Chwolsohn, especially Biruni's *Traces of the Past* (known more commonly in its English version as the *Chronology of Nations*). In this work, Biruni (d. 1050 C.E.) describes the great variety of "Sabians," including those who live in India, Central Asia, Turkey, and Syria; and Pedersen's conclusion was that they share a number of beliefs which may be loosely categorized as gnostic or Hermetic.

Pedersen further supported his thesis with linguistic evidence. In his discussion of the meaning of *Ṣabi'ah*, Pedersen was reluctant to commit himself to an etymology of the word, for he was unwilling to accept either the derivations offered by the medieval Arab philologists who variously attributed it to the Arabic root meaning "to go over from one religion to another" or coming from an eponymous hero who was the founder of the Sabians, or the modern scholarly etymology of the word as coming from the Aramaic, rather than Arabic, *ṣaba* ("to dip," *ergo*, "to baptize"). Although he conceded that it possibly might be related to the Syriac *ṣba* ("to want, to be glad or grateful"), Pedersen felt that a more fruitful approach would be to examine the way in which the word was used in Arabic texts. Starting from Suras 2.59 and 5.73, in which Muḥammad mentions the Sabians in conjunction with Jews and Christians, (and with the

Magians as well in 22.17), describing them as people who believe in Allah, Pedersen argued that

> Before the time of Muḥammad the word must have had a meaning that connects it closely with his doctrines—otherwise he would not be able to use it this way. The prophet himself is called a Sabian, and *ṣabi'ah* is used about those who go over to Islam.

Although later interpretations of the word *ḥanif* were sometimes contradictory, Pederson suggested that Margoliouth's connection of the term Sabian with the Qur'anic usage of *ḥanif* was correct: for the *ḥanif*, like the Sabian, is one who believes in God, but is, like Abraham, neither Jew nor Christian. Since Muḥammad considered himself the restorer of the religion of Abraham, it was in this way that the identification of Muḥammad as both *ḥanif* and Sabian could be understood. The identification of Abraham and Muḥammad as practitioners of the same pure belief would then have been made by the Prophet as part of his attempt to win over the Jews of Medina.

Pedersen's third line of argument was grounded in theories of textual transmission. He pointed out that Chwolsohn, writing in a period before the development of modern source criticism in Islamic studies, arranged his documents according to the chronology of the authors, thereby ignoring the question of the dates of their sources. Thus, the date of composition of a particular work was incorrectly seen by Chwolsohn as more important than the date and reliability of the sources upon which it drew. In analyzing traditions of the sources behind Ibn Ḥazm and Shahrastani, Pedersen concluded that none of the earliest authors used the name Sabian as a special name of a particular group; rather, he maintained, it was a common name of a number of sects scattered through the Muslim territories, all of whom practiced some form of gnosticism; Sabian, then, is a synonym for gnostic.

Given this definition, the stories found in certain Muslim authors connecting Sabian beliefs with those of the Egyptians, the references to Hermes, Enos, Seth and the Agathodaimon, the supposed pilgrimages of Sabians to the pyramids and the secret rituals and prayers would all make sense in the context of this definition of Sabian. Furthermore, such a definition could thus include the gnostic Mandaeans, but, at the same time, it would not exclude the Harranians, as described in Muslim sources. Chwolsohn had been convinced that Muḥammad had some particular group in mind, but

Pederson argued that, rather, "Sabian" was used in Muslim sources as a comprehensive label for a great variety of sects which could be called gnostic.

Granted such a construct, it would then be possible to clarify the meaning of the word *ḥanif* as well. Although its Qurʾanic usage seems to be clear, later Muslim authors used the word to mean both Muslim and pagan.[24] A. Jeffery demonstrated that the word in early poetry "seems generally to mean Muslim and the odd occurrences which may be pre-Islamic to mean heathen." Jeffery, following Nöldeke, Wellhausen and Margoliouth, argued that the word had a Syriac root. Pedersen, in noting these two diverse meanings, noted that the Syriac cognate *ḥanpa* (pagan) is often used to translate the Greek *Hellenes*, that is, a person of Greek culture. By the time of Muḥammad, Pedersen argued, the old paganism had disappeared, "and was only to be found in some form or another as gnosticism—in the widest meaning of the word." In this way, *ḥanif* and Sabian became synonomous.

Such a definition as proposed by Pedersen is necessarily predicated on two underlying assumptions: first, that Muḥammad himself was aware of, and in some way, found acceptable, gnostic ideas; and second, that by the seventh century, all forms of paganism other than the Hermetic-gnostic tradition had disappeared from the Near East. The first assumption can be made only with difficulty, and the second is patently not true, for although it is clear that some of the radical Shiʿite sects, most notably the Ismaʿili Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwan al-Ṣafaʾ*), borrowed heavily from the later Greek literary traditions of mystical Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism, Pedersen did not make a very strong case for such influence in the *Qurʾan* itself, nor did he deal at all with the question of the survival of the more traditional forms of near eastern paganism.

J.B. Segal surveyed the problem of the Sabians once again in 1963.[25] Segal agreed with Pedersen in maintaining that Muḥammad's intent in using the name Sabian was to describe a category of monotheist, and similarly maintained that it was improbable that the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* could be identified with the Mandaeans, for essentially the same reasons that Pedersen had

---

[24] A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, (Baroda, 1938), 112–114.

[25] J.B. Segal, "The Sabian Mysteries," *Vanished Civilizations*, ed. E. Bacon (New York, 1963), 201–220.

given. Segal was inclined to believe that the root of the word Sabian was Syriac. Rejecting the notion that it means baptizer, he pointed out that it would have been unlikely for the Harranians to have adopted a name with this meaning since ablution seems to have been, at best, a minor part of their ritual; he suggested instead that the name was a geographical designation. The region around Nisibis was called Soba, and

> Nisibis was a centre of Syriac culture. To Muḥammad, then, the Sabians might be speakers of Syriac from the area of North Mesopotamia. They believed in a single god, and in the Day of Judgment; they are likely to have had affinities with Jews and Christians.

Even if the etymology proposed by Segal is correct, nevertheless the question of how Muḥammad learned about these particular people of Northern Mesopotamia remains unanswered.

In his doctoral thesis *Analyse Critique des Traditions Arabe sur Les Sabeens Harraniens*, Jan Hjarpe offers essentially the same criticisms of Chwolsohn's methodology as had Pedersen.[26] Hjarpe points out that the jurist Abu Ḥanifa (d. 767 C.E.) and two of his disciples had discussed the legal status of the Sabians of Harran in the century before Maʾmun's visit;[27] and like Pedersen, he discounts the identifications of the "vrais" Sabians with the Mandaeans. Hjarpe does maintain, however, that even if Chwolsohn's thesis of a late appropriation of the name Sabian by the Harranians was now discredited, nevertheless it is indisputable that the Harranians were the representatives of the ancient pagan religion. "C'est l'oeuvre fondamentale de *Chwolsohn*, d'avoir demontre la continuite de la religion des harraniens."[28]

Hjarpe also attempts to delineate Harranian beliefs, an exercise, as he points out, made more complex by the existence of a "Sabian" community in Baghdad, founded by the Harranian Thabit ibn Qurra (d. 901 C.E.) after the second half of the ninth century C.E. It is reported in our Muslim sources that Thabit had quarreled with his coreligionists in Harran over issues of doctrine, and, under the patronage of Muḥammad ibn Musa and at the invitation of the caliph, came to Baghdad, where he founded a school, staffed by

---

[26] J. Hjarpe, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes sur Les Sabeens Harraniens* (Uppsala, 1972).

[27] Ibn al-Qifti, *Taʾrikh al-Ḥukamaʾ*, ed. J. Lippert (Leipzig, 1903), 311.

[28] Hjarpe, *Analyse Critique*, 10.

fellow Harranians.[29] Fluent in Arabic, Syriac and Greek, Thabit was an astronomer, physician, and mathematician. In addition to original treatises in these fields, he wrote commentaries on works of Aristotle, Euclid and Ptolemy. The *Catalog* of Ibn al-Nadim lists treatises on geometry, the motion of the zodiac, conics, gout, smallpox and measles, while Bar Hebraeus states that he composed over 150 works in Arabic and 16 in Syriac. The various works of Thabit and his successors indicate a more than passing acquaintance with the late antique traditions of Hellenic science and philosophy, and Hjarpe argues that the religious tradition of this community indicates a doctrine grounded in esoteric philosophy that has little to do with the traditional practices to be found at Harran as described in the Muslim sources.

In his discussion of the meaning of the name Sabian, Hjarpe concludes that given its context within the *Qurʾan* and its use by the earliest Muslim commentators, it is probable that, as Pedersen had proposed, the term means gnostic, at least in an extended sense. As stated above, such a definition, of course, is predicated on seeing gnostic tendencies within the *Qurʾan* itself. Hjarpe argues more strongly than had Pedersen for such a view, basing his case on two points: first, that concepts such as Apostle, Holy Book, and Revelation in the *Qurʾan*, as well as rituals of ablution are all part of the technical language of gnosticism; secondly, that Muḥammad and his companions are referred to in the *Qurʾan* both as Sabians and *ḥanifs*. The second point is indisputable; but in regard to the first, one must ask whether such concepts are necessarily (or exclusively) gnostic.

Following Pedersen's thesis, Hjarpe points out that in the *Qurʾan* the name Sabian was used by Muḥammad's opponents, while *ḥanif* was a term that Muḥammad applied to himself. Although he concedes that the two terms are not used in an identical way, he suggests that they have, nevertheless, the same sense. Sabian is a term designating a non-Muslim gnostic, while *ḥanif* was, according to Hjarpe, "le mot pour le 'vrai' gnostique, le musulman qui appartenait a la religion naturelle et pure."[30] Like Pedersen, then, Hjarpe considers the label of Sabian as used by the earliest Qurʾanic commentators to be a generic term for gnostic, not designating any particular sect, although Muḥammad may have had a particular gnostic sect

---

[29] Chwolsohn I, 482 ff.

[30] Hjarpe, *Analyse Critique*, 24.

in mind when he used the term. Understanding Sabian as a general appellation for gnostic would then explain the later associations of the word with star worship, for, of course, in many gnostic systems, speculation about the stars and the celestial spheres plays an important role.

Nevertheless, Hjarpe's (and Pedersen's) proposal about the use of the word *ḥanif* and its connection with the term Sabian as gnostic must be rejected as being too narrow in its definition for several reasons: first of all, that the pagans of Harran made good use of Abraham and his association with the city in their dealings with the Muslims is suggested by a passage from the writings of Thabit ibn Qurra. Whatever the cause of their quarrel had been, the break between the Harranians and the believers in Baghdad could not be as complete as Hjarpe argues; Thabit seems to have continued to regard himself as the protector of his fellow believers in Harran, for he is said to have interceded on their behalf with the caliph. According to the Syriac historian Bar Hebraeus, he proudly defended his ancestral traditions:

> Although many have been subjugated to error by means of torture, our fathers, by the hand of God, have endured and spoken valiantly, and this blessed city has never been defiled with the error of Nazareth. And we are the heirs and transmitters of *ḥanputho*, which is honored gloriously in this world. Lucky is he who bears the burden with a sure hope for the sake of *ḥanputho*... Who has made manifest the secret sciences? On whom hath dawned the divinity which gives divinations and teacheth the knowledge of future events except the wise men of the *ḥanpe*? ... And they have filled the world with correctness of modes of life, and with the wisdom which is the head of excellence.[31]

"We are the heirs and transmitters of *ḥanputho*," Thabit declared, and although this Syriac word, like its Arabic cognate, *ḥanif*, is often translated as "pagan" when applied to preislamic religions, it may also have here the same meaning as *ḥanif* seems to be given in the *Qurʾan*: "a possessor of the pure religion." Notwithstanding any Christian bias on the part of Bar Hebraeus, it is not improbable that Thabit, familiar with Muslim doctrine, could have used this word purposefully because of its Qurʾanic associations with Abraham, in order to provide the link between the first *ḥanif* and Sabian "heirs and transmitters" at Harran.

---

[31] Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography*, 153.

Despite the deliberate evocation of Abraham by these non-Muslim Harranians, one cannot agree with Chwolsohn that they constructed a "tissue of lies" in order to deceive their Muslim conquerors. According to Biruni, the Harranians were just as capable of using the story of Abraham to the patriarch's detriment, claiming that he left Harran because he was suffering from leprosy on his foreskin, for which reason he circumcised himself.[32] It is reasonable to suppose, rather, that it was Harran's association with the patriarchs, and especially Abraham, that gave impetus to later Muslim fascination with the city, imbuing what they saw there with sacred meaning.

Secondly, several Muslim sources offer an entirely different perspective on the meaning of *ḥanif* and its connection to the purported belief of the Harranians. Masʿudi (d. 956 C.E.) who himself visited the city in 943 C.E., and who offers the only Muslim eye-witness account of Harran, distinguishes among several different kinds of Sabians in the *Tanbih* (*Notice*):

1. The kings of Rum who were *al-ḥanifa* and *al-ṣabiʾun* before they became Christians. The emperor Julian was secretly a Sabian, and when he renounced Christianity, he reerected the statues which the Sabians put up as images of the highest substances and the celestial bodies, and punished those who did not return to the faith of the *ḥanifs*.
2. The Egyptian Sabians, who honor Hermes and the Agathodaimon as their prophets; the remnants of these Sabians are the Harranians. "They abstain from many foods that the Greek Sabians (i.e., those mentioned above) eat, such as pork, chicken, garlic, beans and other things of this type; they regard as their prophets Agathodaimon, Hermes, Homer, Aratus, Aryasis, Arani, the first and second of this name."
3. The followers of Zaradrusht (Zoroaster), who formerly had embraced the creed of the *ḥanifs*.[33]

In another work, the *Muruj al-dhahab* (*Golden Meadows*), Masʿudi provides the following description of the Harranians' temples:

> The Harranian Sabians have temples according to the names of the intellectual substances and the stars. To these temples belong: the temples

---

[32] Biruni, *Chronology*, 205.

[33] Masʿudi, *Kitab al-Tanbiḥ*, ed. M. de Goeje (Leyden, 1894); Chwolsohn II, 378–379.

> of the first cause and of Intelligence, but I do not know whether it is the first or second Intelligence; also, the temple of world order, Necessity. The temple of the soul is round; of Saturn, hexagonal; of Jupiter, triangular; of Mars, long (rectangular); the Sun square; that of Venus, a triangle in a quadrangle; that of Mercury, a triangle inside an elongated quadrangle, and that of the moon, octagonal. The Sabians have in them symbols and mysteries which they keep hidden.[34]

Biruni in the *Chronology of Nations* describes the Sabians in the following way:

1. The real Sabians are the remnants of those Jews whom Nebuchadnezzar had transported from Jerusalem to Babylon and who chose to remain there. Their religion became a mixture of Judaism and Magianism. "The greatest part of this sect is living in Sawad al-Irak... they live scattered... they do not agree among themselves on any subject, such as direct or indirect revelation. Genealogically they trace themselves back to Enoch, the son of Seth, the son of Adam."[35]
2. The name is also applied to the Harranians, who are the remnants of the ancient religion of the west before it converted to Christianity. They derive their system from "Aghadhimun (Agathodaimon), Hermes, Walis, Sawar. They believe that these men and other sages like them were prophets." Although they themselves did not adopt this name before A.H. 228 in order to be considered "among those from whom the duty of *dhimma* are accepted, they are better known by this name than the true Sabians. But before this time they were called *ḥanifs*, idolators and Harranians."[36]

What is immediately apparent is that a distinction must be made in all our Muslim accounts between the use of the name Sabian as a generic term and its particular application to the residents of Harran. But more importantly, it is clear from the accounts above, that whether true or not, what Masʿudi and Biruni are describing as the beliefs of the Harranians is not gnosticism, but rather, Hermeticism, a Hermeticism enlivened by a heavy dose of Neoplatonic and Neopythagorean doctrine.

---

[34] Masʿudi, *Muruj al-Dhahab/Les Prairies d'Or*, ed. and trans. C. Barbier de Maynard and A. Pavet de Courteille (Paris, 1861–1877; rpt. 1962), 9 vols; Chwolsohn II, 367.

[35] Biruni, *Chronology*, 318.

[36] Biruni, *Chronology*, 318–19.

We shall consider the sources of these definitions of the Sabians of Harran in a later chapter; but whatever we may make of the accounts of Masʿudi and Biruni, the placement within the Hermetic tradition of the Sabians of Harran as described in these Muslim sources was reinforced by two facts: the existence, in Baghdad, of a Sabian community with clear affinities to the Hermetic tradition and close connections to their coreligionists in Harran, and the role of this community in the transmission of the Greek esoteric tradition into Islam.

Even those who were more sceptical about Harranian claims to be the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* linked them to the traditions of esoteric doctrines. Dimashqi, for example, posited two different kinds of Sabians: those who acknowledge the cult of the celestial mansions (i.e., worship the stars), and those who believe in idols. The former asserted that they had acquired this doctrine from Agathadaimon or Seth the prophet, the son of Adam.[37] In fact, he suggests that they derived their name from Ṣabi, a son of Hermes "who is Idris."[38] And although the traditionist Baghdadi asserted that "the people of Wasit and Harran who go by the name of Sabians are not the Sabians of the *Qurʾan*," he nevertheless considered them to be a likely source for esoteric leanings within Islam.[39]

Although there is much in the Hermetic Corpus which has a strong affinity to the gnostic tradition, in their basic assumptions and premises, the two are quite different. The gnostic rejects this world, while the believer in Hermes awaits the revelation of its perfection. "In that hour," Hermes Trismegistus tells his disciple Asclepios in a warning against the gnostic world-view,

> weary of life, men will no longer regard the world as the worthy object of their admiration and reverence. This All, which is a good thing, the best that can be seen in the past, the present, and the future, will be in danger of perishing; men will esteem it a burden; and thenceforward this whole of the universe will be despised and no longer cherished, this incomparable work of God, glorious construction, all-good creation made up of an infinite diversity of forms, instrument of the will of God who, without envy, lavishes his favor upon his work, in which is assembled in one all, in a harmonious diversity, all that can be seen which is worthy of reverence, praise and love.[40]

---

[37] Chwolsohn II, 398.

[38] Chwolsohn II, 409–410.

[39] Baghdadi, *Moslem Sects and Schisms*, 104.

[40] "Asclepios," *Corpus Hermeticum* II, ed. A.D. Nock and A.-J. Festugiere (Paris, 1944–54) 326 ff.

Secondly, although Pedersen and Hjarpe are correct in positing an esoteric element in Islam, and although it is clear that among the most extremist Shiʿite sects there exists a gnostic perspective, it is an overly inclusive definition of gnosticism that allows them to posit that that element is gnostic in origin, and that, as a consequence of that gnostic element, star worshipper and Sabian became synonymous in later writers merely because a reinterpreted astral doctine tends to play such a large role in at least some expressions of gnostic cosmology. Gnosticism, as Hans Jonas has pointed out so elegantly, has its foundations in a belief in a radical dualism of the realms of being "and consequently an extreme polarization of existence affecting not only man but reality as a whole."[41]

This dualism encompasses "God and the world, spirit and matter, soul and body, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death... to the divine realm of light, self-contained and remote, the cosmos is opposed as the realm of darkness." Looking up at the heavens, the gnostic sees not a comforting blanket of the stars, but rather a prison, which has entrapped and keeps prisoner his soul which longs to escape from this world of darkness. The gnostic is hostile to the heavenly bodies, for they serve only to prevent the ascent of his *pneuma* beyond their reach. Given this definition, there is little in our Muslim accounts of Harranian beliefs and practices that would suggest a gnostic system.

Most recently, Michel Tardieu has offered a thorough critique of Hjarpe's thesis,[42] rejecting his distinction between the Qurʾanic usage of the terms *ṣabiʾ* and *ḥanif* as well as his distinction between the community in Harran and that in Baghdad. Nevertheless, Tardieu argues that the Qurʾanic citations of the Sabians among the People of the Book must refer to a particular gnostic sect of Jewish origins known to Muḥammad, basing his view on an etymology of the name incorrectly interpreted nearly 350 years ago by Edward Pocock.[43] Pocock had suggested that the name came from the Hebrew *ṣaba*, which he translated as "army;" thus the Arabic plural *ṣabiʾun* would mean not soldiers, but "des adorateurs de la *ṣebaʾ hassamayim*", i.e. the army of heaven.

---

[41] H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1967), 32.

[42] M. Tardieu, "Sabiens Coraniques et Sabiens de Harran," *Journal Asiatique* 274 (1986), 1–44.

[43] E. Pocock, *Specimen Historiae Arabum* (Oxford, 1649).

According to Tardieu, although Pocock was wrong in his understanding of its meaning, he was correct in the etymology itself; *ṣabi'ah* are the gnostic adepts of the "celestial armies," a term which finds an exact parallel in the Greek *stratiotikoi*, a name used, according to the *Panarion* of the 4th century bishop Epiphanius, by the gnostics themselves. If one accepts Pedersen's thesis as elaborated by Hjarpe and emended by Tardieu, then the answer to the first part of the question posed above—who were the Sabians of the *Qur'an*?—is a simple one: they were one of the many gnostic sects which were part of the intellectual landscape of late Near Eastern antiquity, all of which drew upon a variety of syncretistic religious and philosophical ideologies.

If we take stock at this point, at least some conclusions can be made with some certainty. First of all, whatever the merits of the arguments of Tardieu and his predecessors, it would have to be conceded by all of them that an identification of the Sabians of the *Qur'an* based on Muslim sources cannot be established with any certainty. As S.M. Stern has remarked, "an examination of the various explanations (of the Sabians) given by the Muslim commentators on the Koran shows that they were merely guessing."[44] Although Tardieu is undoubtedly correct that Muḥammad had a specific sect in mind, the evidence for any of the various candidates, including gnostic sects such as the Elkesaites, Mandaeans or "*ṣeba' Hassamayim*", is not incontrovertible; the questions of the origin and beliefs of the Elkesaites and their relationship to the Mughtasila and the Mandaeans, as well the connection of Mani to any of these baptist sects, are still a matter of debate.[45]

Even the publication of the Mani Codex, which gives an account of the period Mani spent among a Babylonian baptist sect that seems to confirm the account in the *Fihrist* has not settled the question.[46] The Harranians themselves, in all probability, will have to be rejected as the Sabians of the *Qur'an* as well. Although it is possible that Muḥammad might have heard the tales associating Abraham and Harran, there is no evidence to suggest that he knew anything about

---

[44] S.M. Stern, *Studies in Early Isma'ilism* (Leiden, 1983), 33.

[45] See the survey of the scholarship in G. Luttikhuizen, *The Revelation of Elchasai* (Tubingen, 1985).

[46] "Ein griechischer Mani-Codex (P. Colon, inv. nr. 4780)," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 5 (1970), 97–217.

the beliefs of the city's current inhabitants. Secondly, Pedersen's thesis that the only paganism to survive down to the time of the Prophet or even to the time of Ibn al-Nadim was some form of gnosticism must be rejected; all our evidence speaks to a contrary view.

The analysis thus far has addressed primarily only one of the questions raised by Chwolsohn, that of the identification of the Sabians mentioned in the *Qurʾan* and their possible relationship to Harran; but we are faced with other, perhaps more complex, difficulties if we are to accept without reservation the other part of Chwolsohn's theory—that the Harranians were in truth merely the remnants of an ancient paganism, who perpetrated an elaborate hoax on their unsuspecting Muslim rulers.

The outline of Harran's history under Muslim rule reveals little of the city's role in the imaginative landscape of Islam. Nevertheless, given the history of Harran in the two centuries after the Muslim conquest and before the alleged visit of Maʾmun, one must reject out of hand Chwolsohn's view which relied so heavily in the account of it given in the *Catalog*. In our final consideration of the now infamous tale, it is clear that the story is suspect on several counts.

First of all, Ibn al-Nadim's source, Abu Yusuf Ishaᶜ al-Qatiyᶜi, is identified as a Christian, whose animosity toward both the pagans of Harran and their Muslim rulers is quite evident. That the Harranian pagans were able to buy a solution from a Muslim shaykh and that the Muslims tolerated such obvious deceit gave to Abu Yusuf proof of the unworthiness of both Muslim and pagan. It is highly unlikely, on the face of it, that the pagans of Harran would have been able to practice their rites openly for the previous two hundred years, if they had not been granted some sort of toleration.[47]

Harran was not, after all, some backwater town, unnoticed by the Muslims until the time of Maʾmun. It had played, as we have seen, an important role in early Islamic history: it was to here that the school of medicine was moved from Alexandria by the Caliph ᶜUmar II in 717 C.E.; it had been the capital of the last Ummayad caliph, Marwan II, and the fame of its ancient oracle of the Moon

---

[47] See discussion in Segal, Tardieu et al.

god was widespread. Muslims had, in fact, plenty of opportunity to observe the city's native non-Muslim population and its religious customs. Especially suspect are Ma'mun's words, accusing the peculiarly garbed Harranians of being those same "adherents of the head" whom Harun al-Rashid had condemned some 40 years before; it is hard to believe that if the account of human sacrifice were true, nothing would have been done by Muslim authorities in the intervening 40 years, given the supposed vehemence of Harun al-Rashid's response.

Two texts support such a view. First, Ibn Shaddad, who visited Harran in 1242 C.E., reported that when the city was conquered by the Muslims, 'Iyad ibn Ghanam made one of the temples of the Sabians into the Friday Mosque,

> but allotted them another locality in Harran where they built another temple which remained in their hands until its destruction by Yaḥya Ibn Shatir who was governor of Harran on behalf of Sharaf al-Dawlah.[48]

Ibn Shatir had been named governor of the city in 1081 C.E. Second is the perhaps less reliable statement, found in the *Chronicle* of the Christian Bar Hebraeus, that a few years before Ma'mun came to Harran, Ibrahim, Ma'mun's uncle and governor of the city,

> permitted the pagans of Harran to perform their mysteries openly, and at length they arrived at such a pitch of boldness that they decked out an ox in costly apparel, and gave him a crown of flowers, and they hung little bells on his horns, and they walked him around the bazaars whilst men sang songs and (played) pipes; and in this manner they offered him up as a sacrifice to their gods.[49]

Although both of these texts suggest that early on the Muslims were aware of the nature of at least some aspects of Harranian religion, they would, at first glance, seem to support Hjarpe's argument for the rituals so described as representing the survival of ancient pagan forms. Nevertheless, although the Harranian calendars contained in both the *Catalog* of Ibn al-Nadim and the *Chronology* of Biruni seem to be describing pagan cultic practices, it is impossible to ascribe dates of composition to either one of them; and at the same time elsewhere in their accounts of the Harranians examine both authors

---

[48] an unpublished manuscript of Ibn Shaddad cited in D.S. Rice, "Medieval Harran," *Anatolian Studies* II (1952), 38.

[49] Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography*, 139.

present Harranian beliefs in an entirely different light. In addition, whatever the historical reality and the Muslim perception of that reality, the Harranians seem to have gained, at least for a while, official recognition. More than 150 years after Ma'mun's visit to Harran, Ibrahim ibn Hilal, a Sabian poet and scholar living in Baghdad (d. 994 C.E.), was offered the vizirate if he would convert to Islam; he refused, but he was able to persuade the amir ʿAdud al-Dawlah to issue an edict of toleration for his coreligionists in Harran, Raqqah and Diyar-Mudhar.[50] The edict permitted the Sabians to visit their prayerhouses, temples, meeting places and assembly halls, and to practice the precepts of their religion in the traditional manner.

Certainly there were many Muslims who considered the Harranians to be pagans who held no special claims to protection. The 10th century Khwarizmi had asserted that the Harranians "were called Sabians (only) from the time of Ma'mun,"[51] and Baghdadi vigorously denied any connection between the Harranians and the Sabians of the *Qur'an*. The difficulty in identifying with any certainty the Sabians of the *Qur'an* should not cloud recognition of the fact that what our various Muslim sources have to say about the identification of the Harranians and their beliefs depends not so much on the reliability of the traditions of *isnad* as on the ideological framework on which their accounts are constructed. Modern scholarship has failed, by and large, to take into adequate consideration the historical and cultural context of the sources that provide Muslim perceptions of the definition, practices and beliefs of both the Sabians of the *Qur'an* and of the inhabitants of Harran under Islamic rule.

In the following investigation, we must keep in mind that there are multiple layers of belief, as well as a variety of ways in which those beliefs may be interpreted by any particular group within the community. Subscribing to esoteric doctrines does not necessarily preclude the practice of primitive ritual, for whenever possible, accommodation between conflicting outlooks is attempted. Finally, and most difficult to resolve we must ask to what extent did issues of Islamic theology and political ideologies determine Muslim per-

---

[50] Chwolsohn I, 660; II, 537.
[51] Chwolsohn II, 506.

ceptions of Harranian beliefs? What role did the particular world view of a Masʿudi, a Razi or a Shahrastani have in determining what they reported about the Sabians? Why and through what processes did some come to regard those people of Harran now known as Sabians as possessors and practitioners of a hidden wisdom?

CHAPTER FIVE

MUSLIM SOURCES

Introduction

"The jurists differ regarding the Sabians among the infidels," comments Baghdadi.[1] The difficult task of determining and defining of the beliefs and practices of the Harranians as described in Muslim sources is made more complex by the widely differing aims of the surviving texts. Discussions of and references to the beliefs of the Harranians and/or Sabians are found in a variety of Muslim sources that may be categorized as follows:

1. works devoted to questions of *fiqh* ("understanding," jurisprudence), most importantly those discussions that deal with the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim.
2. haeresiographies of Muslim "sects," which often attempt to uncover the sources of non-traditionist beliefs and practices, especially those of the *baṭiniyyah* (those groups devoted to esoteric understanding of Islam) and *zanadiqa* (originally employed to denote Manichaeans, but later applied as well to those defined as heretical sects).
3. refutations directed against a variety of non-biblical religions.
4. treatises on Greek *falsafah* (philosophy), including the natural and moral sciences, and *kalam* (dialectical theology).
5. texts produced by esoteric sects within Islam which claim a connection with the traditions of Harran.
6. compendious "encyclopaedias" such as the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadim or the *Chronology* of Biruni.
7. histories, geographies and travelogues that refer to the city of Harran or its inhabitants.

The evaluation of sources contained in each of these categories necessarily entails an analysis of the various genres listed above, as well as a consideration of the circumstances within the Islamic world that produced them, for overarching all interpretations of

---

[1] Baghdadi, *Moslem Schisms and Sects*, 221.

Harranian religion is the history of the development of sometimes conflicting ideologies within Islam, both religious and political. We must sort out the various elements that make up the Muslim portrait of Harran, being careful to distinguish between those who considered their beliefs from traditionist perspectives such as jurisprudence and haeresiography and those who claimed, for a variety of reasons, a spiritual or intellectual affinity with the city of the Moon god. Finally, any discussion of the Sabians of Harran as portrayed in Islamic literature must distinguish between the use of the term Sabian by Muslim authors as a generic term for different forms of non-Islamic belief and its use as a specific term for the inhabitants of Harran.

ʿIlm and *Fiqh*

For the devout Muslim, the *Qurʾan* is the source and foundation of every religious, social, political and intellectual construct in the *Dār al-Islam*, and any evaluation of the Muslim authors who treat the beliefs of the Harranians and/or Sabians depends on an understanding of the categories of knowledge that are the products of the effort to apply the *Qurʾan* to every aspect of Islamic civilization.

The earliest *ummah* (community) of Muslims was formed in Mecca and Medina around the person of Muḥammad and his message of God's revelation that is contained within the *Qurʾan*. As long as he was alive, Muḥammad was the *imam* (leader) of the community and the interpreter of the true meaning of the *Qurʾan* as it applied to every aspect of the life of the believer, thereby laying the foundations for the institutionalization of Islamic society. Even in his lifetime, as the numbers of the faithful multiplied, it became essential for the growing body of believers to devise the means by which the original community, which had been grounded in the personalized rule of the Prophet and the cultural homogeneity at Mecca and Medina, might be replicated throughout the *Dār al-Islam*.

Few prophetic visions have survived the death of their deliverers, and central to the question of the succession to the leadership of Muḥammad was the issue of who and what was to take the place of the authority of the Prophet and his immediate circle of Companions who had been his first converts. How was the idealism of the earliest community to be preserved in the absence of its founder? Although Muḥammad had proclaimed that the *Qurʾan* was the source of all knowledge for the practice of a Muslim life, it did not always yield

immediately clear answers on the variety of religious, political, legal and social issues that faced the growing community of believers.[2]

The question of who was temporarily resolved when, according to at least one of the traditions of the Companions of the Prophet, Muḥammad on his deathbed designated Abu Bakr, one of his many fathers-in-law, as leader of the *ummah*. It was to him as *Khalifah* (Successor) of the "Messenger of God" that the community of believers was to swear its loyalty. Nevertheless, although the selection of Abu Bakr and the establishment of the caliphate might settle the issue of succession for most Muslims, the question of how best to continue to interpret the meaning of Muḥammad's revelation after his death and use it to further build on the structures established by him still remained. The answer was grounded in the faith of Companions of the Prophet, which persuaded them that the community of believers could survive under the leadership of those who had been closest to him, his earliest followers at Mecca and Medina who had been witnesses to the prophet and his vision.

Whatever their understanding of that vision had been, from the beginning of the caliphate there were those who perceived the threat to Islam of routinization of faith, men who were concerned with preserving what they saw as the new understanding of piety as revealed by Muḥammad. Intent on demonstrating the viability of a social order based on *Qurʾan* and the *sunnah* (received practice) of the Prophet, they saw the necessity of determining as accurately as possible the meaning and intent of both text and custom. It was this obligation that led gradually to the development of the various branches of *ʿilm* (knowledge) defined by the faithful as religious science, embracing a number of disciplines, all of which concerned themselves with collecting and validating the revelation contained within the *Qurʾan* and its explication through the traditions of the Prophet.

Included among its earliest practitioners were the *Qurʾan* reciters, whose skill was a product of their piety and whose intellectual efforts were directed toward fixing the text of scripture; the reporters of the *sunnah* of the Prophet, contained in *ḥadith* (the lore preserving the actions and sayings of Muḥammad) whose reliability depended on the veracity of its *isnad* (genealogy); and, finally, the masters of *fiqh*

---

[2] M. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* I (Chicago, 1974), 315–358; W. Madelung, *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London, 1985).

(jurisprudence), who were attempting to interpret and validate the *Shariʿah*, the laws that determine Islamic life in all its ethical and moral implications. For the traditionist schools of jurisprudence, the foundations of *fiqh* were the *Qurʾan* and *ḥadith*, and when these were deemed not sufficient, some schools took recourse in *ijmaʿ* (consensus) and, through the application of personal opinion (*raʾy*), *qiyas* (analogy). Although the major schools of traditionist jurisprudence placed varying emphasis on each of these components (the most conservative Ḥanbalis rejecting the use of personal opinion), they all agreed that at its core were the *Qurʾan* and the *sunnah* (practices) of the Prophet as embodied in *ḥadith*.

Abu Bakr and his successors, ʿUmar and ʿUthman, had been chosen by the consensus of the *ummah*'s leadership; but after the assassination of ʿUthman in 656 C.E., a struggle for power resulted in the selection of ʿAli, first cousin and son-in-law of the prophet, as caliph, whose troubled rule ended with his violent death in 661 C.E. ʿAli's son, Ḥaṣan, recognized at least by a few as his successor, soon abdicated in favor of the cousin of ʿUthman, Muʿawiyah, who had cast himself in the role of ʿUthman's avenger; but despite Ḥaṣan's renunciation of leadership, the "Party of ʿAli" (*Shiʿat ʿAli*) continued to make serious political claims for several centuries.

The earliest Shiʿite movement was grounded in political support of the descendants of ʿAli, based on the belief that the *ʿilm* of the Prophet was more fully retained in ʿAli's line. Taking as their starting point the familial relationship of ʿAli to the Prophet, the Shiʿites placed at the center of their doctrine the figure of the *Imam*, understood as a descendant of Muhummad through his daughter, Faṭima, and her husband ʿAli. The Shiʿites declared that the *Imam* possessed that spark of divine light which, having passed from prophet to prophet since the creation of Adam, was transmitted to the grandfather of ʿAli and Muhummad, in whom it split in two; it now resided in a designated descendant of ʿAli, passing from generation to generation. Through possession of this divine spark, the Shiʿite *Imam* was rendered infallible, as teacher and guide, the instrument through which the divine presence is made evident here on earth, recognized as such by his kinship with the Prophet through Faṭimah and ʿAli, by his official designation by his predecessor, and by his possession of perfect wisdom. Such an interpretation required a radical revision of the meaning of *ʿilm* both legally and spiritually, for the Shi'ites argued that it is within the *Imam* that the authority of the Law resides.

By the beginning of the tenth century, partial closure had been made: the recognition of a line of eleven designated *Imams*, from ʿAli to Ḥaṣan al-ʿAskari (d. 873 C.E.), all descended from the family of the prophet, formed the basis of Shiʿite orthodoxy. But genealogy and politics were clearly not the only issues, for eventually they formed the basis of the conviction that the twelfth *Imam*, Muḥammad, who disappeared sometime after the death of his father, Ḥaṣan al-ʿAskari, had not, in reality, died but was merely in concealment, ready to return on the Final Day as the Guided One (*Mahdi*) in order to restore the true Islam.

The Shiʿites' ideological and spiritual intentions had as their aim the total transformation of the nature of Islam, for their rejection of the caliphates of ʿUmar and ʿUthman had as its corollary the rejection of the testimony of the Companions that formed one of the bases of Islamic law. Thus, although the origins of the Shiʿite movement can be located most clearly within the context of the evolving political structure of the early Islamic community, a far more potent and lasting consequence was its effect on the interpretation of various judicial and theological issues within the *ummah*.

With the gradual disappearance—or disappointment—of ʿAlid political ambitions came an increased emphasis on a spiritualized eschatology, at least among the more moderate Shiʿites. Not all of the *Shiʿat ʿAli*, however, accepted the standard genealogy or this particular eschatological position. Disagreements over the succession to the Imamate, its relationship to the caliphate, the legitimacy of ʿUmar and ʿUthman, and the nature of the *Imam* himself led to the proliferation of dissident Shiʿite sects, the most radical of which took doctrinal positions labeled by both traditionist Sunni and moderate Shiʿite alike as heretical, and which Muslim haeresiographers lumped together under the general heading of *ghulat* (''extremists'').

The Ismaʿilis, or the ''Seveners,'' were the largest of these dissident Shiʿite groups; their political position was that the succession of the Imamate ended not with the twelfth *Imam*, Muḥammad al-Mahdi, but with Ismaʿil, the elder son of the sixth Shiʿite *Imam*, Jaʿfar al-Ṣadiq (d. 765 C.E.). Ismaʿil, although designated as successor, had predeceased his father, and the majority of Shiʿites had accepted Jaʿfar's second son, Musa, as his successor; some, however, supported the claims of Ismaʿil's son, Muḥammad, whose imminent return as the *Mahdi* was preached by his followers; yet others maintained that Ismaʿil had not died but would himself

return as the *Mahdi*. But as with other issues debated among the Shiʿites, arguments about political succession inevitably took on eschatological meaning, and Ismaʿili politics became the point of departure for the development of a great variety of esoteric doctrines about the nature of prophecy and revelation, from which the moderate *Shiʿa* quickly separated itself.

Because of its political stance in opposition to the Sunni position on the caliphate, the Shiʿite movement was to become the home for many non-Arab Muslims who felt estranged from the Arabist focus of early Islamic politics and faith, and who were in all likelihood the source of at least some of its eschatological perspectives. And it was perhaps because the Shiʿite movement became the base of operations for political and social discontent that it also often became the repository of those philosophical ideas and theological positions which appeared alien and dangerous to those whose views were grounded in the *sunnah*. The belief in the *Mahdi* was fed not only by current political tensions but non-Arabist traditions in which messianic expectations had long been part of the spiritual landscape.

In addition, since Shiʿite Islam often found a base of support outside the Arab world, many non-Arab converts to the faith brought along a great deal of cultural baggage which seemed to them consonant with Shiʿite doctrine and for which they often tried to find a place, consciously or unconsciously, within Islam. It was not merely intellectual traditions that were preserved in this way, but pre-Islamic religious ideologies as well. Many of the *ghulat* Shiʿite sects exhibited traces of pre-Islamic esoteric religious doctrines and perceptions, which were now subsumed and hidden under the faith of Muḥammad. Thus it is within *ghulat* doctrines that we find most often the remnants of dualism, Hermeticism, and gnosticism, as well as what many felt was an unseemly interest in the esoteric sciences.

The Shiʿites offered Islam a radically revised meaning of *ʿilm*, for they understood it in the light of the special knowledge of the Prophet that ʿAli alone had possessed and which had been retained as the source of authority in his family more completely than among others of the Companions who claimed the leadership of the community. In the realm of *fiqh*, it led to the emphasis on the privileged knowledge of the *imams* at the expense of the consensus of the community; among the *baṭiniyyah*, those who subscribed to a concealed meaning within the *Qurʾan*, *ʿilm* was redefined to mean a hidden

wisdom, present through all time, to which only an elite few in each generation had access. The Isma'ili roster of earlier prophets who had played a role in the unfolding of cosmic history found room for a number of the familiar figures from pre-Muslim esoteric traditions, including at least a few who must have been familiar to the Harranian philosophers in Baghdad.

Kalam and *Falsafah*

Radical Shi'ite ideologies were not the only means by which alien traditions made their way into Islam, for yet another definition of *'ilm* was formulated by those Muslims who sought a rationalist interpretation of the revelation contained within the *Qur'an*. *Kalam* (rational theology) represents, as it does in Judaism and Christianity, the attempt to harmonize the absolute truths of revelation and the efforts of human reason. It is an intellectual justification of faith, a form of defensive apologetic, that must have had its origins in the first confrontations between Islam and the long-established religious traditions it encountered in the conquest of the Near Eastern Graeco-Syrian world; and eventually some of its practitioners employed the same weapon as had at least some Christians and Jews in their defense of the faith: the methodological framework of Greek philosophy. The earliest history of the encounter of Islam and Greek philosophy can be only dimly perceived, but must surely have occurred as the Arabs conquered the centers of Greek intellectual life in the East—cities such as Alexandria and Antioch—but it is only with the accession of the 'Abbasid rulers in Baghdad, and most especially Ma'mun, that we can observe clearly Arab response to the varied intellectual traditions of classical antiquity.

The methodologies of Greek philosophy as applied to issues of theology produced some temporary and uneasy alliances. At least some Shi'ites found common cause with the teachings of one of the earliest movements in *kalam*, the Mu'tazilites, "partisans of divine unity and divine justice,"[3] whose rationalist approaches to faith were grounded in the dialectics of Greek philosophy. It was, on the surface, the most unlikely of matches, for the Mu'tazilite position was one that drew upon the belief in the validity of speculative

[3] Masudi, *Muruj*, VI.24.

rationalism. Theirs was an explanation of the faith through rational investigation, a methodology of exegesis that argued that the meaning of the *Qurʾan* could be be gained through human reason.

Like at least some of the Christian theologians, the Muʿtazilites had found themselves unable to subscribe to the Muslim traditionist's version of *credo etsi absurdum*. They posited an interpretation of Islam that stood in opposition to the use of the *sunnah*, "the custom of the Prophet," as the only standard of Qurʾanic interpretation, since they argued that consensus, from which the *sunnah* were drawn, did not necessarily produce the truth. It was on this point that they and the *Shiʿat ʿAli* agreed, for such an argument provided the political justification for the Shiʿite position on the validity of the successors of the Prophet, and theological justification for their rejection of part of the *ḥadith* tradition. It was this point, too, that brought violent opposition from the more conservative traditionist scholars of *fiqh*.

The Shiʿites also drew upon another Muʿtazilite postulate in order to buttress their cause. Central to the Muʿtazilite position was a belief in the unity of Allah, whose attributes, power, and knowledge, are created, hypostases that exist outside of him, for nothing can violate his oneness. Included by the Muʿtazilites in the list of created things was the *Qurʾan* itself, and such a view enabled the Shiʿites to see other kinds of knowledge, most especially that which came from the *Imam*, as of equal validity to the Prophet's vision in the *Qurʾan*. Of some appeal also to the Shiʿites must have been the Muʿtazilite insistence on the justice of Allah, with its inevitable corollary of the recognition of choice in human action.

The question of the relationship between belief in the unity of Allah and the different kinds of knowledge gained through revelation and human understanding provided yet another cornerstone of Muʿtazilite teaching. As did other Muslim theologians, the Muʿtazilites divided the forms of human cognition into two classes: necessary and acquired. Into the first category were placed immediate and intuitive forms of knowledge over which one has no real control; into the second fell those forms of discursive knowledge that were in the realm of human responsibility. Although Abu al-Ḥudhayl (d. 849 C.E.), whom Shahrastani calls the founder of Muʿtazilite methodology,[4] had placed the knowledge of the exis-

[4] Shahrastani, *al-Milal w'al-Niḥal*, ed. W. Cureton, (London, 1842); *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, trans. A.K. Kazi and J.G. Flynn (London, 1984), 34.

tence of God into the category of necessary knowledge, other Muʿtazilites argued that the knowledge of the nature of God could be the product of either form of cognition, gained either through revelation or through discursive reasoning. For some, most notably Thumamah ibn Ashras (d. 828 C.E.) and his student Jaḥiẓ (d. 872 C.E.), this view led to the necessary conclusion that the non-believer was not culpable unless he denied the possibility of revelation or, knowing the truth, he rejected it, because those who do not possess the means to make that choice, i.e., to have knowledge of Allah, are merely ignorant and cannot be held responsible for their lack of understanding. Such an interpretation of the nature of knowledge of Allah inevitably led to, on the whole, a greater degree of tolerance for and a greater interest in those non-Muslim perceptions of truth which still had their partisans in the cosmopolitan intellectual circles of Maʾmun's Baghdad.

The methodology of the Muʿtazilite movement was in itself the product of more than a thousand years of Greek philosophical speculation, but in what form and how it reached the Muslims in the earliest stages of the development of their models of theological disputation cannot be precisely determined. The Muʿtazilite moment of glory came during the reign of Maʾmun, whose own Shiʿite sympathies were clear, and who championed their views as the orthodox position. Although it is possible that the increase in interest at the caliph's *Bayt al-Ḥikhmah* (House of Wisdom) in the translation of Greek philosophical works was the product of the Muʿtazilites' prestige, the sources of their particular form of Hellenism probably are to be found in that period in the previous century when the Muslims first were confronted with the welter of intellectual traditions that had been already worked and reworked by several generations of Greeks, Persians and Syrians, both pagan and Christian. The points of transmission are obscure, but the consensus of Muslim sources, both Sunni and Shiʿite, is that Harran was one of the links in the chain of transmission.

In a general sense, however, it is not difficult to see the spiritual sources of Muʿtazilite teachings, especially its central tenet, the unity of Allah, a view which bears not a small resemblance to that which informed the Neoplatonic One. It was on this very issue so dear to the heart of the rationalists, the unity of God, that opinion on the Sabians was divided: Aḥmad ibn al-Tayyib al-Sarakhsi's (d. 899 C.E.) description of their beliefs, derived from Kindi, and found in

the *Fihrist*'s account of the Sabians, presents a Harranian doctrine of divine unity which conforms to the Muᶜtazilite position; the leading Muᶜtazilite of the next generation, ᶜAbd al-Jabbar (932–1025 C.E.), on the other hand, in arguing against the opponents of divine unity, maintained that the Sabians believed in seven astral deities.[5]

The response of the masters of *fiqh* to the principles of a rationalist theology, at any rate, was decidedly mixed. Although most of the major schools of Sunni jurisprudence eventually adopted in varying degrees the methodologies of *kalam*, the followers of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 C.E.) were violently hostile to speculative theology in any form. The Ḥanbalis rejected rationalist arguments in support of the absolute truths of revelation, and with them, any and all "innovations" in the realm of knowledge. The Ḥanbali Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200 C.E.), who in *The Devil's Delusion* condemns sophists, philosophers, and physicists and who cites "the practitioners of *kalam*" as his informants on the Sabians, had thought he recognized in the Harranians the alleged sources of at least some of these innovations. This view was echoed by a later Ḥanbali, Ibn Taymiyah (d. 1328 C.E.), who condemned both the Muᶜtazilites and the *falasifah* because "they had drunk from the same polluted springs, notably the doctrine of the Sabians of Harran."[6]

The Muᶜtazilite perspective seemed too radical a stance for most. It is reported that in the year 912 C.E., Abu al-Ḥaṣan ᶜAli ibn Ismaᶜil al-Ashᶜari, a disciple of the Muᶜtazilites, stood before the congregation of the mosque in Basra and publicly renounced the teachings of his masters, wishing he said, to declare his allegiance to the partisans of custom and the community.[7] Ashᶜari's abnegation of his former beliefs, however, was not as complete as it might have been, for although he abandoned the more speculative aspects of the Muᶜtazilite position, the school of theology that bears his name represents the attempt to establish a middle ground between the rationalist position of his teachers and Ḥanbali opposition to *kalam* in all its forms.

The result of his efforts was the Muslim version of scholasticism, which unlike the doctrines of the Muᶜtazilites, found a secure place

---

[5] ᶜAbd al-Jabbar, *al-Moghni*, vol. 5 (Cairo, 1965), 152–59; G. Monnot, "Sabeens et Idolatres Selon ᶜAbd al-Jabbar," *MIDEO* XII (1974), 13–47.

[6] F.E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs* (New York, 1968), 201.

[7] Ibn ᶜAsakir, *Tabyin Kadhib al-Muftari* (Damascus, 1928), 40.

in Sunni Islam. Part of the Ashᶜarite compromise in the area of methodology was the acceptance of consensus, which the Muᶜtazilites had rejected as a means of validation, and which was, of course, dear to the hearts of the traditionists. He was also willing to compromise on the question of the nature of Allah's essence, declaring rather ambiguously that the anthropomorphic qualities of God described in the *Qurᵓan* had to be accepted without asking how, a view which coincided at many points with the Ḥanbali insistence on the literal meaning of the *Qurᵓan*. On the issue of knowledge and human choice, however, Ashᶜari, although he denied the total operation of free will, was unable to abandon the role of human reason, for he accepted the Muᶜtazilite premise that belief must be buttressed by intellectual understanding that is gained through speculative knowledge.

Two of our most important sources on the doctrines of the Harranians are Ashᶜarite theologians: Abu Mansur ᶜAbd al-Qahir ibn Ṭahir al-Baghdadi (d. 1037 C.E.) and ᶜAbd al-Fath Muḥammad ibn ᶜAbd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 1153 C.E.). The works of both men betray the Ashᶜarite interest in haeresiography as an offshoot of *kalam*, and both reveal the subordination of history to polemical dogma. Shahrastani, whose *Religious and Philosophical Sects* is a further elaboration of the haeresiographies of Ashᶜari and Baghdadi, demonstrates a marked antipathy toward Greek philosophy as it appeared both within and outside Islam, but it is clear that he was familiar with its traditions.

The utilitarian methodologies of Greek dialectic had served *kalam* well on the whole, but there were a few who sought to go beyond the scholasticism of the theologians, for they saw in the very substance of the "foreign" science of *falsafah* the summation of human wisdom. *Falsafah* argued for the existence of a rational wisdom that was analogous to the sacred wisdom of revelation; the philosopher's intellectual effort could achieve another kind of enlightenment almost as worthwhile as that which had been given to the Prophet. It was a position that traditionists viewed with suspicion, for they rightly saw the claims of a human philosophical wisdom as a challenge to the divine revelation of the *Qurᵓan*. The etymology of *falsafah* betrays its origins. The practitioners of *kalam* had discarded the framework in which the utilitarian processes had been developed, but the philosophers of Islam were to make a claim not only on the method but the substance as well, and with it gained a hybrid tradition that embraced all of Greek intellectualism.

Abu-Yusuf Yaʿqub ibn-Ishaq al-Kindi (d. after 870 C.E.), who is the first "Hellenist" *faylasuf* among the Muslims and a major source for the doctrinal positions of the Sabians, was born in Kufa on the banks of the middle Euphrates, an early political center of the Shiʿite movement. Kufa was a Muslim foundation a few miles from the city of Hira, capital of the Lakhmid dynasty, and the most important Arab city in the Fertile Crescent before the coming of Islam. It had played an important role as a point of confluence of Christian, Persian and Arab traditions during the Sasanian period, a role which seemingly continued into the Muslim era. Although he knew no Greek, Kindi was acquainted with members of the Harranian community in Baghdad, and it is likely that his first glimmmer of how the substance of Greek philosophy might be applied to Islamic revelation was filtered through a Harranian prism. His perceptions of Harranian doctrine were preserved, although sometimes criticized, by his intellectual descendants. His students, Sarakhsi and Abu Zayd al-Balkhi (d. 934 C.E.), who cite their teacher frequently, were the sources for many of the later works about the Harranians which cast their beliefs in a Neoplatonic/Hermetic perspective.

Since its beginnings, Greek philosophy had provided a methodology of rational discourse and a way of spiritual illumination, two perspectives that afford diametrically opposed interpretations of the meaning of human wisdom, and subsumed under both were multifarious visions of the natural world. The extent to which the "foreign sciences" of the Greeks in all their forms were known to the Muslims is demonstrated by the lists of their practitioners provided by Ibn al-Nadim in the *Fihrist* (*Catalog*). The encounter of the faith of Islam with the traditions of Greek philosophy have left traces in both realms, for it not only provided Islam with the framework of a rationalist theology but threw open spiritual vistas on which cosmic realities might be glimpsed. For some it was a methodology employed to provide an intellectual justification of faith, but for a few it was a means of gaining a wisdom that might rival that of the divine revelation contained in the *Qurʾan*.

Kalam and Esoteric Islam

As in the case of Greek rationalist philosophy, the earliest points of contact between the various strands of late antique Hermeticism and Islam are often difficult to pinpoint with any accuracy, especially

since the tradition of Hermetic literature in Arabic has as complicated a genealogy as did its Greek, Egyptian and Mesopotamian predecessors. Muslim Hermeticism drew upon both the familiar and unfamiliar, practicing the same processes of syncretism that had been employed in the Hermetic circles of late antiquity, but now in the attempt to find a place for Hermes within the framework of the Islamic world view.

The *Catalog* reports that the Ummayad prince Khalid ibn Yazid (d. 704 C.E.), commissioned some "Greek philosophers" in Egypt to translate alchemical works into Arabic; according to Ibn al-Nadim, "this was the first translation from one language into another in Islam,"[8] although it was only during the reigns of Harun al-Rashid and Maʾmun in the late eighth and early ninth century that Greek science made its presence clearly known in Islam. The establishment in Baghdad of the *Bayt al-Ḥikhmah* by the caliph began a period of large-scale translation of Greek scientific and philosophical works into Arabic, often through the mediating language of Syriac.

Those earlier products of the translation process leave only a bare impression of Muslim concerns; even so, it would seem that the figure of Hermes was known to at least some Muslims before the names of Plato and Aristotle. Both rationalist and esoteric philosophy had made their way into the Muslim world through the filter of the Near East's Hellenistic legacy, in which Hermes had become both a prophet and a philosopher; and it was in both guises that he made his way into the Muslim tradition: as the bringer of a revealed wisdom and as the wise sage of Greek science.

The identity of the figure of Hermes himself had always been, in large measure, determined by cultural context. Egyptian Hermeticism emphasized the role of Thoth in the accounts of divine revelation; Mesopotomian tracts promoted Nebo; and Ishodad of Merw reported there were some Christians who identified the apostle Paul as Hermes. It was likewise among the Muslims: Abu Sahl al-Fadl ibn Nawbakht (d. 815 C.E.), Iranian physician and astronomer at the court of Harun al-Rashid, and from a family that had converted to Islam from Zoroastrianism, presented a genealogy of Hermes grounded in a particularly Persian view of Mesopotamian history.

---

[8] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 581.

Ibn Nawbakht maintained, as reported by Ibn al-Nadim, that the legendary Persian ruler, al-Daḥḥak ibn Qayy had built Babylon, wherein the books containing a description of the world, "its grandeur, the origin of its causes, its foundation, its stars, kinds of drugs, remedies, charms, and other things" were stored in 12 palaces, according to the number of the signs of the Zodiac. Hermes was one of the seven wise men who had been appointed to rule over the affairs of the people, but who were eventually compelled to leave their native land, when a prophet appeared who threw their beliefs into confusion. Each of the wise men left to found a new city:

> He (Hermes) was the most thoroughly intelligent, the most strikingly wise, and the most refined in discernment among them. He went to the land of Egypt, where he ruled over the inhabitants, making the land prosperous, improving the condition of the people, and manifesting his wisdom among them.[9]

Likewise, the Persian Abu Maᶜshar (d. 886 C.E.), who is the other of Ibn al-Nadim's sources for the history of Hermeticism, not only identified the Harranian sage Hermes with Enoch, the grandson of Adam, a familiar figure in both the Jewish and Islamic traditions, but with the Iranian primal figure, Kayumarth, for in his *Book of Thousands*, he declares:

> The name Hermes is a title, like Caesar or Khusrau. Its first bearer, who lived before the Flood, was he whom the Persians call Abanjhan , the grandson of Jayumart (Kayumarth), the Persian Adam; and he whom the Hebrews call Khanukh (ᶜUkhnukh, i.e. Enoch), whose name in Arabic is Idris. The Harranians call upon his wisdom (declare his prophethood).[10]

Biruni's *Chronology* offers a clue to one possible source of this cultural synthesis and its connection to Harran. In his account of the pseudo-prophets, Biruni asserts that the Indian Budhasaf (Buddha) called people to the religion of the Sabians. The creed was adopted by the Persian rulers of Balkh, who held "in great veneration the sun and moon, the planets and the primal elements, and worshipped them as holy beings. . .The remnants of those Sabians are living in Harran."[11] The reference to Buddha and the city of Balkh is not

---

[9] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 572 ff.
[10] D. Pingree, *The Thousands of Abu Maᶜshar* (London, 1968), 14–15.
[11] Biruni, *Chronology*, 204.

difficult to interpret. The city had been the ancestral home of the Barmacids, descendants of the family who had once served as priests of the Buddhist *stupas*, but who after their conversion to Islam, held key administrative positions in the court of Harun al-Rashid, whose sons they educated. It was the intellectual encouragement of the Barmacids, whom Ibn al-Nadim says were accused of *zandaqah* (dualism), that led the caliph to lend active support to the translation of Indian, Persian and Greek scientific works into Arabic; and it is likely that they served as the conduit for a peculiarly Persian perspective on the history of the tradition.

According to Abu Maʿshar, who was himself a native of Balkh and had been a pupil of Kindi, there were three Hermes. It was a view derived from the confusion of the meaning of Trismegistus, an error, as we have seen, not limited to Muslim authors, but it uncannily reflected the cross-cultural origins of the tradition. The antediluvian Hermes, educated by his grandfather, Kayumarth, was the first to be taught the sciences, especially astronomy, and to build sanctuaries; he wrote many books, whose wisdom he preserved on the walls of Egyptian temples, lest it be lost; it was he who constructed the pyramids. The second Hermes lived after the Flood in Babylon. Learned in medicine, philosophy and mathematics, he was the teacher of Pythagoras. The last Hermes was Egyptian, and was the author of books of a "fine and precious work" on alchemy. He was an organizer of cities, a philosopher and physician, who was the teacher of Asclepius "who lived in Syria."[12]

But it would seem that this tripartite identification was secondary, for it was Hermes' reputation as the "scientist" that first gained him *entree* into the Islamic world. The Islamic scientific tradition early on had recognized and paid tribute to this interpretation of Hermes as scientific innovator. The science practiced by Hermes and his successors was understood by the Muslim devotees of esoteric learning, as it had been by earlier generations of Greeks, Egyptians and Persians, to have been primeval science, the knowledge of which had been concealed after some cataclysmic event and now lay hidden. The accounts of Ibn al-Nadim and Biruni make it clear that by the tenth century, Hermes' place in the Islamic traditions of both esoteric philosophy and the occult sciences were assured.

---

[12] C. Burnett, "The Legend of the Three Hermes," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXXIX (1976), 231–34.

Drawing upon the accounts of Ibn Nawbakht and Abu Maᶜshar, Ibn al-Nadim, citing Hermes as both scientist and one knowledgable in the magical arts, credits him with a number of works on astronomy, astrology, medicine and alchemy. One title cited by the *Catalog* in particular reveals the nature of the tradition: *What is Hidden in the Secret of the Stars, also called The Rod of Gold.*[13] Elsewhere Ibn al-Nadim attributes to him various works on

> resuscitation, amulets, and charms; incantations over trees, fruits, unguents, and herbs; names, safeguards, amulets and means of protection, with the letters of the sun, moon, five planets, and the names of the philosophers. . .[14]

He further identifies Hermes as

> the wise man and Babylonian, who moved to Egypt when the peoples were dispersed from Babylon . . . (he) was the king of Egypt, a wise man, and a philosopher'' and the first to talk about the art of alchemy.[15]

This Babylonian Hermes is said to have been in charge among the Chaldaeans of the shrine to ᶜUṭarid (Mercury), and hence was called by that name, for ''in the Chaldaean tongue, ᶜUṭarid is Hermes;'' one of his sons was Ṭaṭ (Thoth). When he died, he was buried in a pyramid at Miṣr.[16] Although we have no direct evidence, there must have been some Harranians who found a place for their Moon god in this syncretistic history. His ancient association with knowledge, wisdom and revelation made him a prime candidate for identification with Mercury and Thoth, among others.

Certainly, there is much in the developed Shiᶜite position in general, and among the Ismaᶜilis in particular, that is sympathetic to Hermetic doctrine in that for both, spiritual revelation becomes the foremost path to knowledge: the gnomic utterances attributed to several of the Shiᶜite *Imams*, most notably Jaᶜfar al-Ṣadiq, suggest that the Hermetic sciences were integrated into the Shiᶜite perspective at a very early date.[17] Jaᶜfar was himself reputed to be the author of the *Book of Divination*, a work that was grounded in a wisdom arising out of the powers of ''unveiling'' that had been granted

---

[13] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 638.
[14] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 733.
[15] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 843–44.
[16] Which pyramid Dodge identifies as the tomb of Cheops (845).
[17] S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (London, 1978), 14.

to the *Imams*. And certainly, the figure of the *Mahdi* himself in many ways resembles the Hermetic revealer of hidden knowledge.

Ismaʿili theology was predicated on the knowledge that the *Qurʾan* and thus Islam had two levels of meaning: a surface meaning (*ẓahir*), evident to all who sought it; and a hidden meaning (*baṭin*), dimly perceived and accessible only through exegesis, that would lay open the "true realities" (*haqaʾiq*). *Ẓahir* is the generally accepted meaning of scriptural law that changes with each prophet, while *baṭin* is that truth that is concealed in the scriptures and the law, unchangeable, and made manifest only through an interpretation that is esoteric in nature. From this perspective, the outward meaning of the *Qurʾan* is merely a covering meant for the uninitiated, but hidden beneath the surface of the text is an interior reality, accessible only through the "secret interpretation of the secret interpretation."

For every revelation there is an interpretation. The true history of the world is contained within the gradual revelation of *baṭin* to those who can comprehend it; the reality is that the cosmos is multidimensional, that man is the microcosm of the macrocosm, and that perfection is contained within a totally spiritual world of light, the *pleroma*, wherein dwell the ten emanations, or hypostases, of the First Cause. The last of these, and the furthest away from God, is the Universal Man, the Spiritual Adam. But a disturbance arises in the *pleroma*, and in order to restore harmony, this agitation and its ensuing emotional products are made material and cast out, resulting in the material, visible universe, at the center of which is earth, its first inhabitant the earthly Adam. This terrestrial Adam is later succeeded by another Adam, who begins the first cycle of human history. There were some Ismaʿilis who maintained that before the coming of the second Adam, there was perfect understanding of the cosmic realities, which were afterwards concealed beneath the *ẓahir* of the Law.

There are to be seven cycles of human history, each one inaugurated by the appearance of a "Speaker," who brings a revealed message. Thus far, there have been six Speakers—the second Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad—and each has been followed by a "Silent One" or "Foundation," whose role it is to uncover the *baṭin* within the message. Each "Silent One," in turn, has been succeeded by seven *Imams*, who concern themselves with the exterior and interior meaning of the "Speaker's" message.

The seventh *Imam* in each cycle was followed by a new "Speaker," who abrogated the law of his predecessor.

In the era of Adam, Seth served as his "Foundation," while in the era of the "Speaker" Muḥammad, ʿAli took this role. Finally, Muḥammad ibn Ismaʿil was the seventh *Imam*, who, some maintain, has gone into hiding, and on his reappearance, will become the seventh and final "Speaker," the *Mahdi*, the "*Imam* of the Resurrection". His message will be the only full revelation of *baṭin*; and ruling the world, he will bring all to judgment. But until that time when the *Mahdi* reappears, the *baṭin* must be kept secret, revealed only to the initiate.

Some Ismaʿilis maintained that after the disappearance of Muḥammad ibn Ismaʿil, there began the era of the "hidden" *Imams*, who go about secretly but have emissaries, who appear openly. The world cannot exist without a living *Imam*, and "anyone who dies in ignorance of the existence of the *Imam* of his time dies a pagan."[18] Such an understanding of the meaning of the Imamate necessarily required a radical reinterpretation of cosmic history, the meaning of the *Qurʾan* and the role of Muḥammad; Muḥammad had declared that he was the "Seal of the Prophets," but the Ismaʿilis had now extended the possibility of revelation to the end of time. Although such a cosmic history recalls gnostic imagery and in fact the Ismaʿilis have been broadly characterized as gnostic, the intellectual and spiritual sources of such teachings are many and diverse; and the gradual transformation of the figure of the *Imam* from political leader to the repository of divine revelation probably owed as much to the model of Hermes Trismegistus as it did to that form of Islamic theological speculation that drew upon a variety of gnostic systems.

The Writing of History

For the Muslim, the writing of history, like *fiqh*, is one of the "traditioned" sciences; and like *fiqh*, the Muslim view of history has its origins in both the *Qurʾan* and the *sunnah* of the prophet. The *Qurʾan* not only contains the Muslim understanding of prior traditions that had come before the revelation given to Muḥammad, but since

---

[18] Shahrastani, *al-Milal w'al-Niḥal*, 165.

Muḥammad saw himself as the culmination of a line of prophets who had appeared in human history, Islam was now open to the perspectives of a universalism that reached back to the time of the creation. At the same time, the flight of Muḥammad from Mecca to Medina had marked for his followers the beginning of a new Muslim era in history, and the collective memory of the Companions of the Prophet, embodied in *ḥadith*, enabled succeeding generations to understand the significance of that event as a total break with past history. The conflict between these two perspectives led some Muslim historians, such as Tabari and Ibn Qutayba, to cast pre-Islamic prophets and men of wisdom as proto-Muslims, who practiced the rites of fasting, pilgrimages and the like, while others were openly hostile to pre-Islamic traditions.

As a traditional science, Muslim historiography, in large measure, relied upon the same methodologies as did *ḥadith* criticism. The chain of transmission that was the hallmark of *ḥadith* became the methodological cornerstone in the writing of *taʿrikh* ("era work"), developed to record the accounts of the wars of conquest and ultimately every aspect of political and social activity in the *Dār al-Islam*. One of the consequences of such an approach is that works such as Tabari's *History of the Prophet and the Kings* place a much greater emphasis on the authenticity of the *isnads* of their sources than on any analysis of historical causation.

Although the analytical and epistemological concerns of Greek and Roman historiography had little impact on the writing of Islamic history, there were those whose sympathies toward the traditions of Hellenic culture opened for them a wider perspective on the past than that found in genealogically correct narratives of the history of Islam. Masʿudi, one of the major sources for the beliefs of the Sabians, although he praised the narrative techniques of both Tabari and Baladhuri, constructed a view of the past that was based on a belief in the continuity of at least cultural history, especially in the areas of "Greek science," and his methodology, as well as his frequent citation of Kindi, Sarakhsi and Jaḥiẓ, suggest a Muʿtazilite influence. His interest in the traditions of natural wisdom, by which some ancient kings and wise men were able to escape from idolatry and worship the one true God, reveal an understanding of the relationship between history and revelation that is consonant with the issues with which the Muʿtazilites were concerned and are reflective of Shiʿite interests as well. Masʿudi provides us with our only

Muslim eye-witness account of Harran, and he used as his source material not only the sacred traditions that lay behind Islam, but the perspectives found in the rational and esoteric non-traditioned sciences of the Greek and Near Eastern past. Although he did not know Greek, his discussion of Harranian doctrine indicates an understanding of at least one interpretation of its history that was recognizable to the student of Hellenism.

The polymath Abu Rayḥan al-Biruni (d. 1050 C.E.) represents yet another aspect of the broadening Muslim perspective on the non-Muslim world. Although careful to follow the Sunni position on Muslim issues, Biruni produced works on all the foreign sciences: mathematics, astronomy, medicine, pharmacology, optics, and mineralogy, and in the *Chronology*, he joined together mathematics and history in order to explicate the position of Islam within the context of universal history. Part of that universal history was preislamic religions, and included in the *Chronology* were the predecessors of Muḥammad, including the "false" prophets of the Harranians, among others. For Biruni, *ʿilm* had been expanded to include every kind of human knowledge.

There were those, of course, who sought to expand the boundaries of history even further, beyond the limitations of ordinary human knowledge. The Ismaʿili *Imam* possesses a hidden knowledge, transmitted by Muḥammad to ʿAli and handed down from generation to generation, which encompasses all truth; and in this knowledge lies the key not only to the revelation the *baṭin* of the *Qurʾan*, but to the secret history of the spiritual and physical worlds as well. It has at its core a privileged view of the hidden meaning of history, revealed only to the initiate, and that knowledge is that the revelation of Muḥammad did not signify a total break with the pre-Islamic past, but rather was part of the continuum that began with Adam and the creation of the world. The last of the Speakers will consummate history by openly revealing the *baṭin* of the *Qurʾan*, but until that point it is, like all *ʿilm*, concealed from the unknowing and ignorant. Revelation contains not only the meaning of the present and the future, but of the past as well. It was within such a spiritual framework that the history of Harran was contained.

CHAPTER SIX

HARRANIAN PAGANISM AND ISLAM

Introduction

It can be agreed by all that, whatever it might have become by the time of the Moslem conquest, the earliest religion of the Harranians was grounded in the common Mesopotamian awe in the powers of nature, whether of earth or of the heavens. But, as we have already noted, successive waves of political, intellectual and religious invasions frequently had given new meanings to ancient indigenous beliefs and cult practices, often only superficially different, but occasionally changing them beyond recognition. H.J.W. Drijvers, in discussing the survival of Syrian paganism in late antiquity has commented that "Although there are quite a number of pagan temples and shrines known in Syria, of which the ruins often are well-preserved, the cults celebrated in these temples and other religious practices are practically unknown."[1] The difficulties are even more acute in the period following the Muslim conquest.

We have now traced the religious history of Harran through the late antique period; we have seen the variety of traditions that informed Harranian outlook. Nevertheless, although all of our Muslim texts purport to discuss the doctrines of the "Sabians," there is relatively little material that gives us any reliable information for the active continuity of these earlier religious practices at Harran after the Muslim conquest. For example, the *Chronicle* of the Christian Bar Hebraeus records that during the reign of Ma'mun, the caliph's uncle, Ibrahim, was made governor of Harran and granted permission to the pagan inhabitants to perform their rites publicly but whether this account is true or merely reflecting hostility toward both paganism and Islam cannot be determined.

In analyzing the beliefs of the Harranians as reported in the literature, we must be careful to distinguish the nature of these sources. Muslim material on Harran is wildly contradictory, incorporating

---

[1] Drijvers, "The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria," 35.

as it does all the religious and intellectual traditions that we have already discussed, for we can find evidence that seemingly points to both the conservative character of cult and ritual and to complex changes wrought by the superimposition of alien cultures.

In addition, any attempt to analyze surviving accounts of Harranian cult and ritual from the seventh century onward is fraught with difficulties arising out of both the fragmentary nature of the sources and a sometimes imperfect understanding by the author of what is being described. Earlier Greek, Roman and Christian Syriac accounts can be corroborated by well-established traditions as well as by archaeological data, but after the Muslim conquest, such parallel evidence is no longer available. Except for the historical information found in the Syriac chronicles, we are totally dependent on Muslim sources for our information, for no text describing the traditional beliefs of the Harranians after the Muslim conquest survives that can be attributed with any certainty to a Harranian author in this period, and just as importantly, none of the Muslim authors who purport to describe traditional Harranian religion have any first-hand knowledge of what was being practiced in Harran during his own lifetime.

Furthermore, archaeological evidence for non-Muslim Harran, which had been scanty for the period prior to 639 C.E., is nonexistent for the city after the Muslim conquest. Although many of the Muslim sources remark upon various Sabian temples, shrines and holy places, their locations cannot be determined with any certainty, and it is difficult to correlate the various descriptions. The clearest indication of the survival of a pre-Islamic paganism may lay in the place names recorded in the Muslim sources: Yaqut, for example, mentions Tar-ʿUz, a village located outside the city containing a temple belonging to the goddess, and Salamsin (The Idol of the Moon god), a village a short distance from Harran and dedicated to the deity; these names are clearly survivals from an earlier period.

The Calendars of the *Catalog* and the *Chronology*

The two most detailed Muslim accounts of traditional Harranian religion are found in the first section of the ninth chapter of the *Catalog* of Ibn al-Nadim[2] and in Biruni's *Chronology of Ancient*

[2] Ibn al-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*, ed. Gustave Flügel (Leipzig, 1871), 318–327; Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadim*, 745–773.

Nations.[3] Both documents present innumerable difficulties of interpretation, due in part to textual problems, in part to the nature of their sources. In addition, we must consider the descriptions of initiation ceremonies contained in the work of the cultural historian Masʿudi and in the *Epistles* of the so-called "Brethren of Purity" (*Ikhwan al-Ṣafa'*), recognizing that these latter documents are the product of a sensibility that, in all likelihood, has little to do with that which produced the calendars of Ibn al-Nadim and Biruni. And before we can even begin to analyze the contents of any of these documents, it is necessary to acknowledge that the chain of textual continuity has been broken, for we are without substantial evidence for the religion of Harran during a crucial period during its history: from the time of the fourth, fifth and sixth century authors discussed above—the *Doctrina Addai*, Ephrem Syrus, Jacob of Sarug and Isaac of Antioch—until the material found in the tenth century *Catalog*.

We had already noted the possibility of distortion in those pre-Muslim sources arising out of a political and spiritual antagonism, and therefore it is ironic that our most detailed, if not necessarily our most accurate, account of Harranian paganism available in the Islamic period was composed by Abu Ṣaʿid Wahb ibn Ibrahim, who is identified by Ibn al-Nadim as a Christian. Ibn Ibrahim's description of the festivals of the Harranians, presented in calendar form, is the source of a major part of the *Catalog's* section on the Harranian Sabians. Nothing is known for certain about him, although Hjarpe suggests a ninth or tenth century date;[4] Bayard Dodge, Ibn al-Nadim's translator, points to an Abu Saʿid Wahb ibn Ibrahim, an acquaintance of Ibn al-Nadim who served as secretary to the vizier of the caliph Muqtadir (908–932 C.E.),[5] although this identification is otherwise unsupported. That at least part of the calendar was composed after the Muslim conquest is indicated by a reference to a Harranian prayer for the destruction of the congregational mosque; but whoever the author might have been, it is impossible to determine his sources.

---

[3] Biruni, *Kitab al-Athar al-Baqiyah ʿan al-Qurun al-Khaliyah*, ed. C.E. Sachau (Leipzig, 1878); translated as *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, C.E. Sachau, (London, 1879).

[4] J. Hjarpe, "The Holy Year of the Harranians," *Orientalia Suecana* XXIII–XXIV (1974–75), 72.

[5] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 283.

Just as importantly, the reliability of the document may be called into question by the fact that Wahb ibn Ibrahim's explication of the religious rites of the Harranians often demonstrates the same polemical hostility toward paganism found in the comments of our earlier Christian authors. Nevertheless, what the calendar seems to reflect overall is a picture of devotion to those deities some of whom, whatever their original function might have been, came to be associated with the divinity of the planets.

Also to be found in this section of the *Catalog* are: (1) an annotated list "in another person's handwriting" of Harranian deities and customs that seems to have been appended to the manuscript of Wahb ibn Ibrahim, and which contains some traditional Mesopotamian and Syrian names of the gods, such as Bel, Belit and Tammuz, as well as others whose identities remain obscure; (2) the comments of a "reliable authority" on the purported customs of various "sects" among the Harranians, which are confirmed by no other text; (3) the account of Maʾmun's visit to Harran, composed by the Christian Abu Yusuf al-Qatiyʿi; and (4) a partial text, "in corrupt and wretched style," of a translation from one of their books of rituals connected with a mystery cult celebrated by the Harranians at the *Bayt al-Bughadhariyyin*.

Finally, Sarakhsi's account in this same section of the *Catalog* of the philosophical doctrines of the Sabians, which will be discussed in the next chapter, interspersed with some information about the social practices of the Harranians, provides some additional information about the names of Sabian festivals and rituals. At the same time, however, the seemingly incongruous mix of primitive taboos, animal sacrifices, planetary worship and philosophy as described by Sarakhsi serves merely to emphasize the difficulty of interpreting Harranian religion. Although Hjarpe has argued that Sarakhsi is our most reliable source for the festivals of the Sabians, his list gives few dates of celebration or any explication of their significance, and the connections with the calendar of Wahb ibn Ibrahim are often obscure. It is possible that since he was acquainted with Thabit ibn Qurra, Sarakhsi's list of feast days and fasts represents an abbreviated Harranian calendar celebrated by the Sabian community in Baghdad, but there is no corroborating evidence to support such a view.[6]

---

[6] Hjarpe, "The Holy Year of the Harranians," 68–83.

Our second major source is the calendar contained in the *Chronology of all Nations* of Biruni, copied, according to the author, from a work by a certain Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Aziz al-Ḥashimi, about whom almost nothing is known,[7] and consisting merely of a list with various feasts and fasts entered under individual months. Biruni himself says of Ḥashimi that he "has given in his astronomical almanac called *al-Kamil* (*The Perfection*) a short notice of the feasts of the Sabians, simply relating the facts without investigating and criticising their origin and causes... I have not the same means to investigate this subject which I had for the others."[8]

Sachau commented in his edition of the *Chronology* that the text in question seems "in many places . . . to be corrupt beyond hope" and that Biruni "has transferred (it) from a book of al-Ḥashimi just as it was, with all the mis-spellings, faults, and lacunas, and since the time of the author the text has become worse and worse."[9] Some attempts have been made to emend and explicate the text; but even so, more recent commentators, such as Hjarpe, have remarked similarly on the difficulties presented by the calendar. Given the brevity of the entries in Ḥashimi's calendar, it can be used, for the most part, only as a contrast to the more detailed account of the festivals given in the *Catalog*.

Aside from textual difficulties, the use of these calendars in the *Catalog* and the *Chronology* as an argument for the continuity of paganism in the Muslim period presents other serious difficulties. First is the fact that, as we have noted above, our late antique Christian authors had provided only the names of deities worshipped at Harran, and it is difficult to determine whether the amplification found in our Muslim texts, especially in the *Catalog*, of Harranian rituals and festivals truly represents a continuity of this tradition. Are these customs and beliefs being described contemporaneous with our texts? If not, to what period do they belong?

Secondly, and perhaps more problematically, there are many divinities and rituals given in both calendars to which there is no direct reference in the earlier material on Harranian religion. At the very least, both accounts seem to point to an extraordinarily heterogeneous religious tradition, as demonstrated by the ethnic diversity

---

[7] C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, Suppl. I (1937), 386.
[8] Biruni, *Chronology*, 319.
[9] Biruni, *Chronology*, 442.

of divine names; but such a generalization does nothing to resolve the apparent discontinuity between elements of the earlier and later cult. It is clear, for example, that the Moon god, who has played such a prominent role in earlier Harranian history and religion, is just one among many deities in the extremely crowded pantheon as described by the sources of Ibn al-Nadim and Biruni. Again, given the variegated nature of our evidence, one must ask whether all the rites recorded form part of a coherent whole or whether what we are looking at is the heterogeneous product of nearly 3,000 years of religious development.

Finally, and perhaps most difficult, there are relatively few points of correspondence between the two calendars themselves, beginning with the time of the New Year celebration: the calendar of Ḥashimi begins with Tishri I (September–October), at the time of the autumn equinox, which was the beginning of the astronomical year in ancient Mesopotamia, although Biruni comments that the Harranians celebrated the New Year on the first day of Kanun II (January, the new moon which comes closest to the winter solstice). Following the entry of Ḥashimi's calendar, Biruni states that "one of those who record their doctrines says that the days of the equinoxes and solstices are festivals for them, and the winter solstice is the beginning of the year."[10] Wahb ibn Ibrahim, on the other hand, begins his calendar with the more traditional Mesopotamian date of celebration at the vernal equinox in Nisan (April), which was, after Hammurabi, the beginning of the civil year, although he does make note of a great festival celebrated on the last day of Kanun I, which would coincide with the winter solstice.

It has been suggested that the differences in the two calendars might be explained by the fact that they date from different periods or places, but the first cannot be proved and the second seems unlikely since both calendars contain local place names (e.g., the Greek Orthodox Church and the market street in Wahb ibn Ibrahim; Dhabana, in Biruni and Yaqut; and Dayr Kadhi, in both texts) and thus must be specific to Harran. It is possible, as Michel Tardieu has suggested, that given the heterogenous cultural traditions of Harran, that a variety of dating systems were used in Harran, each the product of a different ethnic strand; thus, the discrepancies

---

[10] Biruni, *Chronology*, 318.

among the various calendars found in the Muslim sources as to the date of the New Year might merely represent these different traditions. Tardieu cites as evidence Simplicius' commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, which he argues was composed in Harran, and which remarks upon, in connection with the notion of consequence discussed in Book 5 of the *Physics*, the calendrical systems of the Greeks, Asians, Romans and Arabs, each one beginning at a different solstice or equinox. In attempting to trace Simplicius' place of residence after his return from Persia, Tardieu makes a strong case for Harran, not only because the traditions of a pagan Syriac-Greek intellectual life were still strong in the sixth century C.E., but because the survival of the variety of calendars within the different ethnic communities within the city may be the source of Simplicius' illustration.[11]

Nevertheless, even if the discrepancies of the commencement of the New Year may be resolved by Tardieu's reading of Simplicius, and leaving aside the question of the several centuries that separate Simplicius' commentary from our Muslim sources, a great number of inconsistencies between the two calendars in regard to the names of the deities, the dates and the kinds of festivals in the Harranian sacred year still remain. A comparison of just two of the months will demonstrate the textual and historical difficulties. For the month of Nisan, the *Catalog* records:

> 1–3 Nisan: a feast to Baltha, who is Zuḥarah (Venus)
> 6 Nisan: sacrifice to "their divinity, the Moon"; also, a feast to the seven deities, the devils, jinn, and spirits, as well as the Lord of the Blind
> 15 Nisan: the celebration of the mystery of the North
> 20 Nisan: a pilgrimage to Dayr Kadhi, with a sacrifice to Zuḥal (Saturn), Mirrikh (Mars), and the Moon, as well as to the seven deities, the god of the jinn, and the Lord of the Hours
> 28 Nisan: a pilgrimage to Sabta, with a sacrifice to Hermes, the seven deities, the god of the jinn and the Lord of the Hours.

For the same month of Nisan, Biruni (Ḥashimi) gives the following:

> 2 Nisan: Feast of Damis
> 3 Nisan: Feast of antimony

---

[11] M. Tardieu, "Les Calendriers en Usage a Harran d'apres les Sources Arabes et le Commentaire de Simplicius a la Physique d'Aristote," 40–57, and I. Hadot, "La Vie et l'Oeuvre de Simplicius et de Simplicius d'Apres Sources Grecques et Arabes," in *Simplicius Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre, Sa Survie*, ed. I. Hadot (Berlin, 1987), 3–39.

4 Nisan: Celebration of Ploutos
5 Nisan: Feast of the idol of Venus
6 Nisan: Feast of *mmar* (?) and of the Living Being of the Moon. "On the same day is the feast of Dayr Kadhi"
8 Nisan: The breaking of the great fast. The feast of the birth of the spirits.
9 Nisan: Feast of the Lord of the Hours
15 Nisan: Feast of the mysteries of Simak (the brightest star in the constellation Virgo)
20 Nisan: Feast of the assembly at Dayr Kadhi
28 Nisan: Feast of Dayr Sini

Leaving aside for the moment the identity of such deities as the Lord of the Blind or the Lord of the Hours, there are several correspondences that can be found in the two accounts of Nisan: the emphasis on Venus in the beginning of the month (although the dates do not precisely correspond); the pilgrimage to Dayr Kadhi on the 20th; the 6th as a day dedicated to the Moon. Additionally, Wahb ibn Ibrahim lists under the month of Adhar a 30-day fast beginning on the 8th of Adhar, whose conclusion would correspond to the end of the Great Fast in Biruni.

For the month of Tishri I, no such correlations can be found, however. The *Catalog* says:

> In the middle of this month they make burnt offerings of food for the dying. That is, each one of them buys a bit of every kind of edible meat and fruit to be found in the market, whether fresh or dried. Then they cook varieties of cooked food and sweetmeats, all of which are burned during the night for the dying. With this food there is also burned a bone from the thigh of a camel, which is given to the dogs of persons in affliction so that they will not bark and terrify the dying. They also pour mixed wine over the fire for their dying to drink, in the same way that they eat the burnt food.[12]

The *Chronology* reports:

6 Tishri I: Feast of Dhahbana (which Yaqut identifies as an important Sabian shrine at the source of the Balikh river) [13]
7 Tishri I: Beginning of the celebration of the feast
13 Tishri I: Feast of *Fudi Ilahi*
14 Tishri I: Feast of *Ilati Fudi*
15 Tishri I: Feast of the Lots

---

[12] Flügel, 323; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 760–61.
[13] Chwolsohn I, 481.

It is to be noted, however, that some adjustments can be made between the two documents, for in several places, the calendar of Ḥashimi in the *Chronology* seems to be off by a month from that of the *Catalog*: for example, Wahb ibn Ibrahim says that in the month of Tammuz (July), the women weep for the god "Ta-Uz." This festival celebrated everywhere in Mesopotamia is marked more improbably in the *Chronology* as occurring on the 7th of Ḥaziran (June). It may be possible, then, that some of the discrepancies in dates within the month are due to scribal error.

Traditional worship in the *Catalog* and the *Chronology*

In considering to what extent the conservatism of religious tradition might have survived at Harran into the Islamic period, we should look for evidence of those deities especially associated with Harran mentioned by our pre-Islamic Christian texts: the Moon and the Sun, Bath Nikkal, Baʿalshamen, Bar Nemre, My Lord with his Dogs, Tarʿatha, and Gadlat. Other divinities which, according to these same documents, were worshipped in the region around Harran will have to be searched for as well: Nebo and Bel (Edessa), and ʿUzzai (Beth Hur). Finally, we must also look for the survival of some form of planetary devotion, with the heavenly bodies representing the visible embodiment various aspects of the divine. In examining the evidence of our Muslim sources, we must keep in mind two questions: What do the *Catalog* and the *Chronology* tell us about the persistence of pagan worship at Harran and the forms that this devotion took? And can we see in these two calendars evidence for the continuing evolution of the meaning of their worship?

The Moon God and Other Male Deities

Of the Harranian deities mentioned by our earlier sources, only the Moon and the Sun, and the various titles of the Goddess are mentioned with any clear consistency in both calendars. The account of Wahb ibn Ibrahim in the *Catalog* gives the following rituals in honor of the Moon god and may be compared with the festivals listed on the same date in the *Chronology*'s calendar:

1. *Catalog*: On the sixth of Nisan (April) they sacrifice a bull to the Moon (*Qamar*).
Chronology: On the 6th of Nisan, they celebrate the feast of the Living

Being of the Moon. On the same day is the feast of Dayr Kadhi. (Yaqut says that Dayr Kadhi is a Sabian temple, the only one left in Harran.)
2. *Catalog*: On the 20th of Nisan, they go to Dayr Kadhi, a sanctuary near one of the gates of the city, where they sacrifice three bulls to "Kronos, who is Zuḥal (Saturn); for Aris, who is Mirrikh (Mars), the Blind god; and one is for the Moon, which is Sin."
Chronology: On the 20th of Nisan is celebrated the feast of the assembly at Dayr Kadhi.
3. *Catalog*: On the 24th of Kanun II (January), they observe the birthday of the Moon. At this time, they observe the mystery of the North, slaughtering sacrificial victims and burning 80 creatures both four-footed beasts and birds. They eat and drink and for the gods and goddesses they burn rods of pine. This may be the Feast of Birth cited by Sarakhsi.
Chronology: According to an appended note of Abu al-Faraj Al-Zanjani on the 24th of Kanun II, there is the observation of the feast of the nativity. This may correspond to the Birthday of the Moon, recorded in the *Catalog* as occurring in the following month.
4. *Catalog*: Beginning on the 8th of Adhar (March), they hold a fast to the Moon for 30 days. This fast is confirmed by Sarakhsi.
Chronology: On the 8th of Adhar, there is the beginning of the great fast, which lasts for 29 or 30 days.
5. *Catalog*: On the 27th of every lunar month, they go out to Dayr Kadhi, their sanctuary, where they make offerings to Sin.

In addition, the calendar of Ḥashimi reports the following feasts in honor of the Moon that are not found in the *Catalog*:

1. On the 7th of Ayyar (May), they celebrate the feast of Ḍaḥḍak, the idol of the Moon.
2. On the 24th of Aylul (September), they celebrate the feast of the Lords of the coming forth of the New Moons.
3. On the 20th of Kanun II, "they pray to the Bel of Harran."[14]
4. On the 28th of Nisan, there is the feast of Dayr Sini (the Place of the Moon), but whether it is a feast dedicated to the Moon is not made clear. On that day, according to the *Catalog*, the Harranians go out to a village called Sabta, where they sacrifice a bull to Hermes, and "nine lambs to the seven deities, with one also for the god of the demons and one for the Lord of the Hours." Dodge suggests that *sabta* may in fact be read as *sini*.

The clearest link with the ancient Mesopotamian form of lunar worship that can be found in either calendar is the remark in the *Catalog* that on the 27th of every lunar month they go out to Dayr Kadhi, where they "slaughter and burn offerings to the god Sin, who is the

[14] Whom Lewy, "Points of Comparison," has identified as Sin (140).

Moon." The continuation of the observance of the phases of the moon is confirmed by Sarakhsi who remarks that there are four times when offerings are made to the celestial bodies during the month: the conjunction (when the new moon becomes visible), the opposite position, the 17th and the 28th day. Biruni's calendar agrees that the 17th of each month is a feast although it does not link the date directly with the moon: "the reason for which is the beginning of the deluge on the 17th of the month (lacuna). . ."

Earlier evidence for the association of the Moon god with the 17th of the month include a letter from the period of Sargon, that in describing some of the ceremonies of the Moon god, declares that day to be a festival to Sin;[15] and the stele of Nabonidus that records the king's predicted exile of ten years ended "on the very day which the king of the gods, the Divine Crescent, had (in the dream) predicted, the 17th day of Tashritu, of which it is said in the hemerologies: a day on which Sin is gracious."[16]

The offering described in the *Catalog* must have its antecedents in the ancient monthly festival, recorded in a hemerology found in the library of Ashurbanipal, dedicated to the consort of Nergal, the twin brother of Sin. Such a celebration would mark the imminent disappearance of the waning moon, and the beginning of his struggle in the underworld. Further explication of the meaning of Harranian planetary ritual is provided by this same Assyrian document, which states that the 28th of each month was a festival called the *Bubbulu* (to be washed away) of Nergal, which must have been performed in order to keep the darkness of Nergal from completely overwhelming the Moon god and to guarantee his triumphal return.[17]

Although in the Assyrian period Nergal was identified with Saturn, in Babylonian astrology, he was identified with Mars because of their similarly violent natures;[18] and Wahb ibn Ibrahim records that on the 28th of each month, the Harranians made sacrifices in honor of Ares, who is Mirrikh (Mars). The close conjunction of sacrifices to the Moon god and Mars would confirms the identification of the latter with the Mesopotamian Nergal, and the survival of an earlier religious ideology.

---

[15] Combe, *Culte du Sin*, 59.
[16] ANET, 562–63.
[17] *Cuneiform Texts*, xxv.50.
[18] A. Bouche-Leclerq, *L'Astrologie Grecque* (Paris, 1899), 41.

Mars is identified several times in the *Catalog* as the "Lord of the Blind" (*Rabb al-ʿUmyan*), and the god is given the same epithet in the list of deities apppended to the calendar written "in another person's handwriting," where he seems to be parenthetically described as a very evil spirit (*ruḥ shirrir*). Chwolsohn suggested that the epithet stemmed from the planet's fiery color, reminiscent of the violence and destructiveness of the god,[19] an explanation that is confirmed in the *Ghayat al-Ḥakim*: "They give to Mars the name Mara-Samya, which means the blind lord, and they call him blind because of his extreme violence and because in his rage he strikes without regard."[20] Such a description would be equally apt for Nergal, with whom Mars was identified.

Harold Ingholt has suggested, however, that the epithet was a misreading of the god's original name. Pointing to several Edessene names which contain the Aramaic element *Samya*, which had been commonly thought to mean blind, Ingholt preferred to see it as derived from *shamin*, or heaven. Thus, the Lord of the Blind should be, instead, the Lord of the Heavens, or Baʿalshamen, arguing that this god could be more closely identified with Ares than a hypothetical "Lord of The Blind."[21] Certainly, as we have seen, the worship of Baʿalshamen played an important role in the religious life of late antiquity in Northern Mesopotamia, but ultimately the connection between several Edessan names and the Lord of the Blind seems rather tenuous, and given the confirming evidence of the *Ghayat al-Ḥakim* which also calls him Mara-Samya, must ultimately be rejected.

Mars as Nergal may be connected with the Moon God in another festival in the calendar of Wahb ibn Ibrahim. On the 20th day of Nisan, the Harranians go to Dayr Kadhi where they sacrifice three bulls to "Kronos, who is Zuḥal (Saturn); Aris, who is Mirrikh (Mars); and Qamar, who is Sin. They also slaughter nine lambs: seven for the seven deities, one for the god of the jinn, and one for the Lord of the Hours." On this same date, Biruni records "the Feast of the Assembly at Dayr Kadhi." As we had noted previously, in an earlier period Nergal had also been identified with the planet Saturn; the joining together of Saturn and Mars with the Moon god

---

[19] Chwolson II, 188.

[20] de Goeje, "Memoire posthume," 360–61.

[21] H. Ingholt, "Inscriptions and Sculptures from Palmyra," *Berytus* V, pt. 2 (1938), 129.

may represent the union of two different aspects of Nergal, the twin brother of the Moon: as ruler of the underworld and as the god who brings pestilence and war.

Another explanation of this feast day on the 20th of Nisan can be found in what is written about the Harranians "in another person's handwriting," following Wahb ibn Ibraḥim's calendar in the *Catalog*. On that day, according to the anonymous author, they go out to Dayr Kadhi, "near to Harran, to the east," to await the return of the Idol of the Water (*Ṣanam al-Maʾ*), who had fled their land during the days of the Tyrannic Star (*Asṭah Waṭiraniqus*).[22] Although they begged it to return, it refused, saying it would never return to the city. "I will, however, come to this point (*hahuna*)." The Syriac word for *hahuna* is *kadha*; hence, each year the Harranians go out to Dayr Kadhi to await the idol's return. The same ritual is described in *Epistle* IV, 306, of the Brethren of Purity, but the figure whose return they await is Arus: "this one poured the water which fell from the gods in the time of Astruniqus." The identity of this deity is unknown, although it has been suggested that the name is the transliteration of the Greek Eros.[23] The epistle, however, compares this ceremony of the Harranians to that of the Jews who wait for the Messiah, making such an identification obscure.

Lewy posited that the *Asṭah Waṭiraniqus* referred to the Pleiades, which vanish from the heavens between the 15th and 20th of Adhar. Thus, the "Days of the Tyrannic Star" refer to that period between the conjunction of the Pleiades and the Moon and their passing out of sight. On the 20th of Nisan, they would go out to Dayr Kadhi to await the moon's return. In Babylonian myth, Enlil, unable to control the seven evil spirits, summoned the other gods and divided up the rule of heaven with them. It has been suggested that these evil spirits were often associated with the Pleiades, which in the Age of Taurus vanished in the light of the sun for 40 days at the time of the spring equinox.[24]

Whatever Muslim texts may have made of this rite, it is not outside the range of possibilities that what is being described in the *Catalog* is some form of the ancient Mesopotamian *akitu* festival of Sin performed at Harran, and that the Idol of the Water is the god

---

[22] The Arabic transliteration, seemingly, of the Greek *aster tyrannikos*.
[23] Y. Marquet, "Sabeens et Iḫwan al-Ṣafaʾ," *Studia Islamica* 24 (1966), 51.
[24] H. Lewy, "Points of Comparison," 143–45.

making his triumphal return in the traditional manner by canal barge to his city, this despite the fact that our earliest cuneiform texts give the date of that event at Harran as the 17th of Siwan (June; see above). The month of Siwan since at least the Babylonian period had been dedicated to Sin and his twin Nergal; and elsewhere in Mesopotamia, the *akitu* festival was generally celebrated in each city in the month dedicated to its protecting deity.

Svend Pallis argued, however, that in post-Hammurabi Mesopotamia, the civil New Year was moved from Tishrit (at the autumn equinox), and the *akitu* festival universally was celebrated in the month of Nisan (spring equinox), as a New Year's festival;[25] thus, the Arabic *Kadhi* may be a corrupt reading of *akiti*, despite the supposed Syriac etymology. The calendars of both the *Catalog* and the *Chronology* mention that on the eighth day of the previous month of Adhar the Great Fast of thirty days begins; it is confirmed by Sarakhsi, who lists among the Sabian festivals the "Feast of the Breaking of the Thirty." Biruni adds that it is a time of lamentation, and it is possible that this fast was held in preparation for the annual return of the god.

al-ʿUzza, Tarʿatha and Bath Nikkal

As mentioned in our earlier discussion of the goddess at Harran, it is often difficult to perceive real differences among the various female deities, since their functions and attributes tend to be all-embracing; as a result, the boundaries separating them as distinct divinities may be more apparent than real, their different names representing the Arab, Aramaic, and old Mesopotamian strands in Harranian religion. Within the broader context of female fertility, each tradition had developed a particular role for the goddess. We have already noted that male deities seem to be much more responsive to political and social change, and an examination of the Muslim accounts of Harranian religion demonstrates that whatever the forms her worship took at Harran, they reveal much more clearly the continuity and stability of much earlier traditions in Mesopotamian and Syrian religion.

---

[25] S. Pallis, *The Babylonian Akitu Festival* (Copenhagen, 1926), 31.

The calendars of the *Catalog* and the *Chronology* records the following festivals of the goddess:

1. *Catalog*: On the first three days of Nisan, the Harranians honor Baltha, who is Zuharah (Venus).
Chronology: On the 2nd, is the feast of *Damis*, on the 3rd is the Feast of antimony. On the 5th is the feast of Balin (Balti?), the idol of Venus. In the *Catalog*, Ibn Ibrahim records that on the 30th of Adhar begins the month of Tamr, and during this month is the marriage of the gods and the goddesses; they divide in it the dates, putting kohl (antimony powder) on their eyes. Then during the night they place beneath the pillows under their heads seven dried dates, in the name of the seven deities, and also a morsel of bread and some salt for the deity who touches the abdomen. Such a festival might then correspond to the feast of antimony mentioned by Ḥashimi.
2. *Catalog*: On the 4th day of Kanun I (December), they begin a seven-day festival in honor of Baltha, who is Zuharah, whom they call *al-Shahmiyyah* (the Glowing One). They build a dome within her shrine and adorn it with fragrant fruits; in front of it, they sacrifice as many different kinds of animals as possible. "They also [offer] plants of the water." a ritual which in all likelihood has some connection with the springtime offering, widespread in the Near East, of "gardens of Adonis" in celebration of the renewed fertility of the god.
Chronology: On the 7th is the feast of addressing the idol of Venus. In addition, Ḥashimi lists for the same date, one month later (the 4th of Kanun II) the feast of Dayr al-Jabal (the place of the mountain) and the feast of Balti (Venus). This may be the same festival recorded by Wahb ibn Ibrahim, the month's difference being the product of scribal error.
3. *Catalog*: On the 30th of Kanun I, the priest prays for the revival of the religion of *ʿUzuz* (sic).

In addition, the feast of the "Weeping Women" in honor of "Ta-uz" celebrated in the middle of the month of Tammuz, according to the *Catalog*, must be added to the list of festivals in which the goddess is honored, for clearly this is the ancient Mesopotamian rite which reenacted the death of the fertility god Tammuz and the mourning of Ishtar. Among the goddesses mentioned in "what is in another person's handwriting" in the *Catalog* is Rabbat al-Thill, "who received Tumur (dates)." In ancient Mesopotamian religion, it was Dumuzi/Tammuz who was the power of growth in the date palm; thus, Rabbat al-Thill, the Mistress of the Herd, must be Inanna/Ishtar. The anonymous author adds that it was Rabbat al-Thill who guarded the sacred goats, perhaps dedicated to Tammuz as the shepherd god, which were offered as sacrificial victims.

Also found in Biruni, but not mentioned in the *Catalog* are:

1. On the 9th day of Tishri II (November), *Tarsa* (Tarʿatha?) the idol of Venus
2. On the 17th day of Tishri II, the feast of *Tarsa*. On the same day they go to Batnae (Sarug). On the 18th day of Tishri II, there is the Feast of Sarug; it is the day of the renewal of the dresses.
3. on the 25th of Kanun II, the feast of the idol of Tirratha (sic).
4. on the 3rd and the 7th of Ab (August), there is the feast of *Daylafatan*, the idol of Venus.

Every layer of Mesopotamian history is thus represented by the great variety of names, ranging from Akkadian to Aramaic, that are used to describe the goddess. Although the significance of the rituals and festivals included in the *Chronology* is difficult to interpret, it is clear that according to Ibn Ibrahim in the *Catalog*, the goddess retained her original functions as both earth mother and Evening Star. The scantiness of the evidence permits no further interpretation.

Evidence for a Planetary Cult in the *Catalog*

Much has been written both by our medieval Muslim authors and by modern commentators on the existence of a planetary cult among the Sabians of Harran, but evidence for the existence of such devotion to the planets *qua* planets in any organized form is scanty and ambiguous in its meaning. Textual proof for the existence of a cult dedicated to the planets tends to fall into two categories, both of which present difficulties in interpretation: that which is connected with what seems to be the traditional worship of the various deities associated with the planets, such as Sin, Shamash, Mirrikh, or Zuḥarah, the source of almost all of which is the *Catalog*, and that which seems to indicate a form of devotion with its roots in a Hermetic, Neoplatonic or even gnostic view of the cosmos.

The arguments for the existence of esoteric planetary cults will be discussed in the next chapter. Much more problematic is the fact that many of the Muslim sources on the Sabians simply label them as worshippers of the planets and stars, without providing any further description of their practices. Further complicating the question, as we have already seen, is the application in some of the texts of the label of Sabian to a wide variety of non-Muslim groups. It is, of course, possible that such a form of devotion did exist at Harran in the Muslim period, but it is just as likely that such a view is grounded not only in inherited traditions about the ancient religion of the "Chaldeans," but in a generally dismissive attitude toward

pre-Islamic paganism among the more traditional commentators.

Even the detailed account in the *Catalog* of what purports to be the traditional religion of the Harranians is not particularly illuminating, for the calendar refers specifically to the seven planetary deities as a group only twice. Ibn Ibrahim's description begins with the names of the days of the week, each dedicated to a particular planet, a custom so widespread as to be meaningless, and concludes with the remark that

> They state that the seven heavenly bodies, that is, the deities, are males and females who marry and have passions for one another, and also have bad and good luck.[26]

Such a statement, however, may merely indicate the existence of a popular belief in astrology, rather than any clearly defined planetary worship. The frequency with which reference is made to the Moon god, for example, is more likely a product of Sin's historic role as the protecting deity of the city than as a member of a celestial pantheon.

Elsewhere in the calendar, offerings are made to the "seven deities," but since "the seven" are often included along with references to specific planetary deities, it is difficult to conclude without further evidence that they are the heavenly bodies. For example, in the month of Nisan, bulls are offered to "the god Kronos, who is Saturn; one is for Aris, who is Mars, the Blind God; and one is for the Moon, which is Sin. They also slay nine lambs: seven for the seven deities, one for the god of the jinn, and one for the Lord of the Hours."[27]

Conclusions

Although the calendars of both the *Catalog* and the *Chronology* may obscure and misinterpret what they purport to describe, the survival at Harran of ancient rites and practices, in whatever transmuted form they might have assumed, is clearly possible. The conservative quality of Harranian religion, so amply demonstrated through nearly 3,000 years of history, coupled with the persistence of paganism even in those near eastern communities nominally converted to

---

[26] Flügel, 325; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 765.
[27] Flügel, 322; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 756.

Christianity and Islam would seem to indicate that there is, at the very least, a core of historical truth in these accounts.

It was not, however, the practice of traditional paganism that ultimately attracted the interest of many Muslim authors who turned their attention to Harran, for much of what is reported by Ibn al-Nadim and Biruni elsewhere in their accounts of Harranian religion is the product of another sensibility. In order to understand the way in which Harranian belief made its deepest impression on Islam, we must go beyond the antiquarian interest expressed by these calendars and explore the process by which the development of particular ideologies within the Muslim community determined Muslim understanding of Harran. It was a process that was grounded in the desire on the part of some Muslims to lay an intellectual foundation on which they could build a world view, and who thought that they had found at Harran a tradition which would be useful for that enterprise.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HARRAN, HERMETICISM AND ESOTERIC ISLAM

Introduction

The search for evidence pointing to the existence of philosophical and esoteric traditions among the Harranians during the Muslim period requires a completely different kind of investigative approach than that which was used in a consideration of the survival of pre-Islamic religious cult and ritual. Muslim interest in pre-Islamic paganism may be broadly characterized, despite its occasional polemic tone, as antiquarian and perhaps ahistorical, while the interpretation of the esoteric doctrines of Hermeticism is in large measure shaped by ideological concerns of the Muslim reporters, the sources of which may have little to do with the actual beliefs and practices of the Harranians.

The elements of an ancient "traditional" paganism in the calendars of the *Catalog* and the *Chronology* were easily characterized as polytheistic, and thus countered by the injunctions of the *Qurʾan*; but the doctrines of Hermeticism became part of the intellectual and spiritual apparatus of at least some members of the *Dār al-Islam*. The question of a Hermetic tradition at Harran is complicated by the fact that although the religious and intellectual history of the city suggests that Harran most probably served as one of the entry points of Hermeticism into Islam, we have little first-hand evidence for the existence of such a tradition at Harran itself. It may be possible, nevertheless, through an examination of the possible sources of Hermeticism found in Islam, not only to evaluate the truth of this line of transmission, but also to gain some insight into what, if any, role Muslim interest in such teachings played in shaping their perceptions of the Sabians of Harran.

Greek Philosophy and Harran

The role of the Harranian coterie centered around Thabit ibn Qurra and his intellectual descendants in the development of Islamic science has been well-documented, and his importance in this

process of transmission is undisputed. His reputation as a scientist was known even in the west: Roger Bacon called him, a bit inaccurately to be sure, "the supreme philosopher among all Christians, who has added in many respects, speculative as well as practical, to the works of Ptolemy." Thabit's lasting fame in both the Christian and Islamic worlds rested, however, not on his philosophical and scientific commentaries, but on his supposed authorship of various treatises on astrology and the occult sciences, most notably image magic. Listed among his works is a translation from Syriac of Proclus' commentary on a tract called the *Golden Testaments of Pythagoras*.

Thabit's dual roles in the intellectual traditions of Islamic science, that as sober translator and investigator of Greek science and that as master of the esoteric doctrines of Harran, indicate two separate traditions which are to be found concerning the Harranian Sabians in Islamic sources. Accordingly, any examination of the Sabian tradition within Islam must be one that considers both these perceptions, for it was in two entirely different ways that the influence of what Muslim authors understood as Sabian doctrine came to be felt in Islam. One, the role of Harranians like Thabit in the transmission of Greek science and dialectic method into Islam, was the consequence of an attempt on the part of some to establish a rationalist Islamic theology; the other, the search for the key that would reveal the secrets of a hidden truth, the result of a need on the part of others to transcend rationalism.

Sarakhsi, a disciple of Kindi, was acquainted with Thabit ibn Qurrah, which may explain the emphasis on a rationalist philosophy in his account of Sabian doctrine. Kindi himself had participated in the intellectual life of Baghdad during the reign of Maʾmun, in which setting he was exposed to those Muʿtazilite perspectives which encouraged such a reading. Sarakhsi, who wrote commentaries on the Aristotelian corpus,[1] declares that their beliefs about matter, the elements, form, nonentity, time, place and motion are in accord with Aristotle, citing various works of Aristotle from which the Harranians purportedly drew their views. He also reports that the Sabians "agree that the world has a prime cause who is eternal and a unity. . . .no attribute of things created is connected with Him."[2]

---

[1] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 599.

[2] Flügel, 318; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 746.

Although it has been suggested that Sarakhsi is the most reliable source for the doctrines and practices of the Harranian Sabians,[3] it must be conceded that what Sarakhsi is presenting is Sabian belief as described to him by Thabit ibn Qurrah; furthermore, what is true of the Sabianism of Baghdad as represented by Ibn Qurrah's works and reputation may not be true for Harran. More importantly, Sarakhsi's own philosophical perspective must also be taken into account. He was labeled by Biruni as "the most notorious heretic among the people of his time,"[4] and was executed in 899 C.E., perhaps as a result of his identification with the Muʿtazilites. Franz Rosenthal has pointed out that Sarakhsi's exposition of Harranian doctrine as a Neoplatonic offshoot of Greek philosophy is probably reflective of a Shiʿite, particularly an Ismaʿili, interpretation of Sabian doctrine.[5] In fact, many of the details in his account of Harranian practice coincide with the description of the Sabians found in the *Epistles* of the Ismaʿili Brethren of Purity.

In addition, Sarakhsi's statement that their "assertion about matter, the elements, form . . . is in accord with what Aristotle presented"[6] may in fact be true, but only insofar as he understood of what the Aristotelian corpus consisted. He cites several treatises of Aristotle, including *Metaphysica*, *Physica auscultatio*, *De Caelo*, *De generatione et corruptione, De sensu* and the *Meteorologica*, the views contained in which concided with those held by the Harranians; but it is clear that the messengers sent "for their guidance and for confirmation of proof" belong entirely to another tradition. The Harranians themselves, according to Sarakhsi, attributed their doctrine to Hermes. In fact, despite his claim for the Aristotelian origins of the Harranian world view, the philosophical perspective of the doctrine that Sarakhsi presents is closer to Neoplatonism in its overall outlook, but with certain elements that demonstrate a knowledge of the Hermetic tradition.

The original fault may have not been with Sarakhsi or even Thabit ibn Qurrah himself, for such errors in attribution were common; Kindi himself had before him treatises that were labeled as the

---

[3] Hjarpe, "The Holy Year of the Harranians," 69.

[4] Biruni, *Chronology*, 206.

[5] F. Rosenthal, *Aḥmad b. aṭ-Ṭayyib as-Sarahsi, A Scholar and Litterateur of the Ninth Century*, AOS 26 (New Haven, 1943), 36.

[6] Flügel, 319; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 749.

work of Aristotle, including one entitled *The Theology of Aristotle*, which in fact was an abridgement of some of the *Enneads* of Plotinus. In part it was a natural confusion that was the product of the Greek philosophical schools, which had insisted, since the late Hellenistic period, that Plato and Aristotle were really saying the same thing. The tendency of at least some of the later Platonists to focus their attention on Aristotle clouded the picture further; in the *Notice*, Masʿudi credits Plato with the authorship of what was in reality a Neoplatonic commentary on Aristotle.[7] In addition, Aristotle's own interest in the motions of the heavenly bodies and phenomena of physical change contributed to his later reputation among the mystics as a master of astrology and the occult sciences. The 8th century Syrian monk, David bar Paulos, had described him as "surpassing all in his knowledge," comparing his wisdom to that of Solomon,[8] and according to Thabit,

> Aristotle said that whoever reads philosophy and geometry and every science and is without experience of astrology, will be hindered and obstructed, because the science of talismans is more precious than geometry and more profound than philosophy.[9]

It had been a dream in which the Greek philosopher appeared to Maʾmun which compelled the caliph to seek scientific manuscripts in the country of the Byzantines. Aristotle's final words to him were, "Whosoever gives you advice about gold, let him be for you like gold; and for you is oneness (of Allah)."[10] Besides, authorial attribution was as much a matter of philosophical perspective as of actual knowledge of the text. In the medieval period, after all, the author of the *Timaeus* also was given credit for a number of works on alchemy and astrology. Given this conflation of traditions, it is not surprising, then, to see Hermes credited by the Sabians with the authorship of a philosophical treatise, described in the following way by Ibn al-Nadim:

> Kindi said that he saw a book which these people authorized. It was the Discourses of Hermes on the Oneness of God, which he (Hermes) wrote

---

[7] M.J. de Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* (Leiden, 1870–1894), VIII, 162.

[8] S. Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation," 25.

[9] Thabit ibn Qurrah, *de Imaginibus*, Versio I, in *The Astronomical Works of Thabit b. Qurra*, ed. F.J. Carmody (Berkeley, 1960), 180.

[10] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 584.

> for his son, and which was of the greatest excellence on the subject of divine unity. No philosopher exerting himself can dispense with them and agreement with them.[11]

Thus, in searching for possible interpretations of Harranian belief as seen through Muslim eyes, it is essential to consider the sources of Muslim perceptions, for it is not a coincidence that the primeval bestower of wisdom was said by Kindi to be the author of a tract that purported to reveal the absolute proof of the Unity of God, a thesis which had been a matter of discussion among the Muslim theologians. It seems equally clear that, given his connections with Thabit ibn Qurrah, Sarakhsi was describing what he thought he had learned from first-hand acquaintance; his interpretation, however, was the product of his own attitudes toward "Greek" science and philosophy. Perhaps, too, the existence of such a tract would help to classify the Harranians as "People of the Book," and thus gain toleration. For the Muslim, the various manifestations of *ʿilm* all have their roots in the revealed truth that is contained in the written word of the *Qurʾan*. Muḥammad had seen himself as the seal of those prophets who had been sent by God with revelations contained within scriptures, and it is for this reason that the supposed possession of a revealed scripture becomes such an important component of the accounts of the Sabians.

A different filter of Muslim theology must have been employed by Shahrastani in his account of the Harranians. Although his haeresiography drew upon the traditions of the Ashʿarite Baghdadi and others, Shahrastani was accused by some of adopting "the dreams of the Ismaʿilis;" in his conversations he was said to speak only of the philosophers and took no interest in religious laws. For Shahrastani, the label of "Sabian" embraced a great variety of beliefs, but all were grounded in one way or another in astral doctrine, and he described the Harranians as "a class of Sabians who maintain the adored Creator is both One and Many."[12]

Masʿudi, whose citations of Kindi and Sarakhsi as authorities on natural philosophy suggests, as has been noted, a Muʿtazilite outlook,[13] reports in the *Golden Meadows* that on his visit to Harran in 943 C.E., he saw on the door-knocker of a "place of assembly" a

---

[11] Flügel, 320; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 750.
[12] Chwolsohn II, 442.
[13] Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs*, 274.

"saying of Plato" written in Syriac that read, according to his hosts, "He who knows his own essence becomes divine." He adds that it was Plato also who compared man to an upside-down tree, whose roots are in the heavens and whose branches are in the earth.[14] The second Platonic metaphor can be found in the *Timaeus*;[15] the source of the first is more problematic. Michel Tardieu suggests that it may be a paraphrase of a passage from the *I Alcibiades* (133 C)[16], but that requires a rather broad reading of the Greek text; but whatever its source, Masʿudi and his Harranian hosts clearly believed it to be the words of the philosopher.[17]

In the *Golden Meadows*, Masʿudi had distinguished two groups among the Harranians to whom he attributed Greek origins: the common people, who differ from the learned among them in their ideology (*madhahib*); the common people practice sacrifice and divination and perform various rituals, but the wise men among them are philosophers.[18] That Masʿudi credited Greek philosophy as the source of at least one kind of Harranian wisdom may reflect the presence of a Neoplatonic tradition at Harran, when placed alongside his translation of the inscription above the door of the meeting house. The sources for this Neoplatonism are obscure, although Tardieu has argued that it was to Harran that Simplicius and Damascius came after their return from Persia, where they had gone after the closing of the Academy in Athens in 529 C.E., because they found the paganism of Harran more congenial than the Christianity of Antioch. He suggests that the "place of assembly" was not a prayer house (as Chwolsohn had translated, employing the word's more normal usage), but in reality the Platonic Academy in Harran.

According to Farabi and Masʿudi, however, the chain of transmission for at least one form of Harranian Greek philosophy that made its appearance in Baghdad at the beginning of the tenth century had begun at Alexandria, not Athens.[19] Sometime after

---

[14] Chwolsohn II, 372–73.

[15] Plato, *Timaeus* 90, A7–B2.

[16] Tardieu, "Sabiens Coraniques," 14.

[17] Masʿudi repeats the same "saying" in connection with the Harranians in his *Notice*.

[18] Chwolsohn II, 371–72.

[19] Masʿudi, *Tanbih*, 122; Farabi is preserved in Ibn Abi Uṣaybiʿah. See Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs* and M. Meyerhoff, "Von Alexandrien nach Baghdad," *Sitzungberichte der Academie der Wissenschaften Berlin* XXIII (1930), 328–429.

900 C.E. three "masters of Harran," Quwayri, Yuḥanna ibn Ḥaylan and Abu Yaḥya al-Marwazi, began to teach and produce commentaries on what seems to have been the more technical aspects of Aristotelian logic; they were all Christians and Masʿudi asserts that they were the last disciples of the Alexandrian school that had moved first to Antioch in the mid-eighth century and then to Harran during the reign of Mutawakkil (d. 861 C.E.).

Their connection to the Neoplatonic elements of Harranian doctrine is obscure. Tardieu argues that Thabit's learning was the product of a long tradition of Greek philosophy at Harran, that received a new infusion of intellectual energy by the arrival of the exiles from Persia.[20] He rightly points out that a mid-ninth century arrival of Greek philosophy at Harran is not sufficient to explain the scope of Thabit's acquaintance with Greek science, and certainly the doctrine of the Sabians of Baghdad, as described by Sarakhsi, reflects a Neoplatonic rather than Aristotelian outlook. Although Tardieu's argument cannot be entirely convincing because it is impossible, in the end, to explicate the history of philosophy at Harran in the intervening three hundred years between the arrival of the Neoplatonists and Thabit, certainly such a connection would illuminate not only one of the potential entry points of Greek science into Islam, but more specifically the philosophical training of Thabit ibn Qurrah who had left Harran for Baghdad more than 70 years before Masʿudi's visit. Ibn al-Nadim reports that Thabit was originally a money-changer in Harran before he set out for the bright lights of Baghdad, but this biographical information is suspect, for the breadth of his knowledge of Greek science indicates an extensive familiarity with the academic tradition.[21] An early acquaintance with the Greek texts seems apparent; that he is reported to have quarreled with his brethren over matters of doctrine may lend support to Masʿudi's distinction between the two groups of Harranian Sabians, for Thabit would clearly belong to "the wise men among them."

Another less reliable source for the philosophical traditions of Harran is found in the works of Muḥammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi (d. 925 C.E.), the polymath physician and alchemist who was said

---

[20] Tardieu, "Sabiens Coraniques," 19 ff.
[21] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 647.

to have been the author of a variety of philosophical treatises, almost none of which survive except in citations by other later authors, most notably Masʿudi who describes him as a Pythagorean. Kindi had acknowledged the superiority of revelation over philosophical wisdom, but Razi rejected the need for prophecy totally, a view which earned him the reputation of heretic. Razi's metaphysical and theological views, as far as they can be reconstructed,[22] are a peculiar blend of Platonic and Aristotelian physics and metaphysics, although he himself gave credit to the Harranians as well as to Democritus and others of the pre-Socratics.[23] Masʿudi, who describes him as a Pythagorean, declares that he learned his doctrine from the Sabians of Harran about whom he wrote a book,[24] an opinion which was generally accepted by later Muslim commentators. Most modern scholarship has rejected, however, any connection between Harran and the introduction of pre-Socratic physical theory into Islam, considering it a product of the school of Kindi, most notably Razi,[25] but such attribution highlights not only the difficulty in determining the sources of Razi's doctrines, but even more importantly, the idealized role the Harranians played in the *isnad* of Greek philosophy within Islam.

Harran and the Hermetic Tradition

Like its Greek counterpart, Islamic Hermeticism covered a multiplicity of views and approaches, ranging from roots in ancient traditions of magic to exegesis of pseudo-Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy to the most esoteric doctrines of alchemy, astrology and the other occult sciences, although by what means these doctrines passed into Muslim hands cannot be fully understood. Despite the still very difficult issues of the chains of transmission, however, it is clear that there were those so inclined among the Muslims who sought to assimilate the esoteric heritage of late Near Eastern

---

[22] P. Kraus, *Razis Opera Philosophica* (Cairo, 1939).

[23] Kraus, 187.

[24] Masʿudi, *Muruj*, IV, 67–68.

[25] See Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs*, and more recently, S.M. Stern, *Studies in Early Ismaʿilism* (Leiden, 1983). Peters points out that the association between the pre-Socratics and Harran appears for the first time in Razi; Stern argues that Razi gathered his information from commentaries on the *Qur'an* and the now lost work of the Ismaʿili philosopher Nasafi.

antiquity and make it their own. All of those who did so were adherents of one or another branch of the *Shiʿat ʿAli*.

By the mid-ninth century, and perhaps even in the time of Maʾmun, Muslim authors had identified Hermes with the Qurʾanic Idris, or Akhnukh (Enoch), the grandson of Adam, who was regarded by the Muslims as the founder of the arts and sciences, as well as of *ḥikmah* (gnosis) and *falsafah*. According to Masʿudi, the source of that identification was the Sabians.[26] Baghdadi noted in his work, *Sects and Schisms*, that a connection between the Sabians and the *Baṭiniyya* might be seen:

> Others have linked the *Baṭiniyya* to the Sabians in Harran. They also find confirmation of their view in this that the Sabians keep their doctrines secret and reveal them only to their adherents. Like them, the *Baṭiniyya* do not reveal their doctrines save to one who becomes one of them after they administer an oath to him that he will not relate their mysteries to anyone outside their group.[27]

It was a view, as we shall see, that at least some of the more radical Shiʿite sects did not deny. Thus, it is possible that when Sarakhsi says that the "investigation of wisdom" was the goal of their practices, he is using "wisdom" in its well-known esoteric sense and so defining them within the context of a particular form of Shiʿite revelation.

The Shiʿites as a whole were disposed, as we have seen, to define revelation in much broader terms than Sunni traditionists, and their search for the *Qurʾan*'s hidden meaning did not preclude using whatever out of past revelations or methodologies might be helpful. To what extent any of the more extreme Shiʿite sects drew directly upon the esoteric traditions of Harran may never be fully determined, but what is evident is the fact that theological perspectives within Islam were often the determinant in the Muslim discussion of Sabian beliefs and practices in relationship to Hermeticism. Just as the Graeco-Roman world had found in Near Eastern religion and thought what they desired to see, so too did their Muslim successors.

Sarakhsi's comments on the beliefs of the Harranians provides at least the opportunity to analyze the process, for it is clear that both Ibn al-Nadim and his sources understood the Harranian Hermes

---

[26] Masʿudi, *Muruj*, 31.

[27] Baghdadi, *Moslem Sects and Schisms*, 131.

within this "Hermetic" context. Sarakhsi's statement, derived from his teacher Kindi, that "Their famous and eminent personalities are Arani, Aghathadhimun and Hermes. Some of them also mention Solon, the ancestor of the philosopher Plato on his mother's side," may indeed be a genuine article of Harranian belief, but it is also reflective of an esotericist perspective on the history of Greek philosophy. Biruni, who had embraced the Sunni orthodoxy of his Turkish rulers, but had been raised and educated in the Shiᶜite tradition, says of the Sabians of Harran in his *Chronology*: "They have many prophets, most of whom were Greek philosophers: Hermes the Egyptian, Agathadhimun, Walis, Pythagoras, Baba, and Swᵓr, the grandfather of Plato on the mother's side, and others."[28]

We have already discussed above the late antique transformation of the Greek god Hermes; Biruni's "Aghathadhimun" was a product of the same process. The *Agathos Daimon*, who had begun his divine career as the genial protecting spirit of the Greek hearth, became in late antiquity one of the Hermetic prophets who had come with a revelation of divine knowledge. And just as Hermes had come to be identified with Idris-Enoch, the Agathodaimon took on new life as Seth, the son of Adam, who according to earlier Jewish and Christian Hermeticism, had engraved on stone the names of the months, years and the constellations, with the assistance of an angel of God. It was probably due to this previous history that Seth found a place in Ismaᶜili cosmology.

Indeed, although there is certainly a strong thread of Aristotelian physics tempered by Platonism present throughout his discussion of the Sabians, it is nevertheless clear that, on the whole, Sarakhsi had not been describing the teachings of an Academy or Lycaeum, but rather, either an esoteric form of ancient pagan belief given new life through intellectual justification or, more likely, a localized Hermetic tradition perhaps enunciated by Thabit ibn Qurrah himself. The names of the Sabian prophets as listed by Biruni support such a view, for although some are obviously the product of a Greek sensibility, Biruni's Walis and Baba are particular to a Harranian tradition. Walis is identified elsewhere by Biruni as the teacher of Greek philosophy in Harran who gave instruction to Zoroaster: "he (Zoroaster) said of himself that he used to go with his father to

---

[28] Biruni, *Chronology*, 205. A similar list is given on 305.

Harran to meet Elbus (Walis?) the philosopher, and to acquire knowledge from him.''[29] Baba was reported by the geographer and historian Ibn al-ᶜAdim (d. 1262 C.E.) to have been the Harranian author of a book of prophecies, including one that predicted that ''the might of the people of Harran will be raised to the highest degree.'' The predictions of Baba were part of a larger collection of *Prophecies of the Pagan Philosophers*, whose cast of characters is all too familiar: Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistos, Plato, Pythagoras, Porphyry and the Sibylline Oracles. Ibn al-ᶜAdim remarks on the poor quality of Baba's Arabic; it has been argued that the textual difficulties of the Arabic suggest a Syriac original.[30]

According to Ibn Taymiyah, ''the preacher of Harran'' and Ibn al-ᶜAdim's source, this prophet supposedly made his revelations 367 years before the Hegira, but a more likely date for their composition is sometime during the Ummayad period, although Brock has argued that they may be as early as the sixth century C.E.[31] The fact that this work was in the possession of a member of a Muslim family which had provided the Friday Mosque with preachers for several generations demonstrates the extent to which such local traditions managed to insinuate themselves into Islam.

Although in the *Golden Meadows* Masᶜudi posits a Greek source for Harranian doctrine, the *Notice* attributes an Egyptian origin to Harranian doctrine, thus pointing to another understanding of the roots of this tradition, combining as it does the two perceptions of the historical sources of Hermeticism: Greek philosophy and Egyptian wisdom. Categorizing four groups of Sabians (Chaldaean, Chinese, Greek and Harranian), he classified those of Harran as different from the Greek Sabians; rather, the Harranians were the remnant of the Sabians of Egypt, who ''abstain from many foods that the Greek Sabians eat, like pork, chicken, garlic, beans and other things of this type; they regard as their prophets Agathodaimon, Hermes, Homer, Aratos (perhaps the 2nd century B.C.E.

---

[29] in a passage from the *Cosmology* not found in Sachau. S. H. Taqizadeh, ''A New Contribution to the Materials Concerning the Life of Zoroaster,'' BSOAS VIII (1935–37), 947–954. Taqizadeh identifies Elbus with Walis.

[30] Unpublished mss. cited in F. Rosenthal, ''The Prophecies of Baba the Harranian,'' *A Locust's Leg*, 221.

[31] S. Brock, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London, 1984).

author of the *Phaenomena*), Aryasis, Arani, the first and second of this name."[32]

Yet, despite the fact that Masʿudi placed the Harranians among the Egyptian Sabians, these prophets were, in reality, of Greek extraction. Masʿudi ascribed to the Harranians the belief that the two prophets named Orpheus, who possessed hidden knowledge, are identical with Hermes and the Agathodaimon, and his list of foods forbidden to them is, in fact, reminiscent of various Pythagorean and Orphic taboos. Independent confirmation of the latter comes from Yaqut, whose biographical dictionary reports that the Sabian Ibrahim ibn Hilal (d. 994 C.E.) was offered 1,000 dinars if he would eat broad beans, an offer he refused since they were forbidden.

Even those who were more sceptical about the Harranians' claims to be People of the Book linked them to esoteric tradition. Dimashqi, for example, posited two different kinds of Sabians: those who acknowledge the cult of the celestial mansions (i.e., worship the stars), and those who believe in idols. The former group asserted that they had acquired this doctrine from Agathadaimon or Seth the prophet, the son of Adam.[33] And although Baghdadi asserted that "the people of Wasiṭ and Harran who go by the name of Sabians are not the Sabians of the *Qurʾan*," he nevertheless considered them to be a likely source for esoteric leanings within Islam.[34]

Nevertheless, it is impossible to prove with any certainty whether in either work Masʿudi was actually describing genuine Harranian beliefs or presenting an archetypal construct for a generic Hermetic sect. Into that second category most likely falls Masʿudi's description of the temples that supposedly had stood in Harran, dedicated to the various planets and cosmic principles, although not, as he admitted, in his own time:

> The Harranian Sabians have temples with the names of the intellectual substances and the stars. . . the Temple of the Soul is round, that of Saturn is hexagonal, of Jupiter triangular, of Mars rectangular, of the Sun square, of Venus triangular within a rectangle, of Mercury triangular within an elongated quadrangle, and of the Moon octagonal. The Sabians have in them symbols and mysteries which they keep hidden.[35]

---

[32] Chwolsohn II, 378–79.
[33] Chwolsohn II, 398.
[34] Baghdadi, *Moslem Sects and Schisms*, 104.
[35] Chwolsohn II, 367.

Similar descriptions of the temples of the Sabians can be found in Shahrastani[36] and Dimashqi, who cites Masʿudi frequently as his source.[37]

There are several possible interpretations of this portion of Masʿudi's account: one may accept at face value his statement that these temples once were standing in Harran, and served the functions described by Masʿudi; or, even less likely, one may argue that there may have been such structures, but they served purposes other than those that Masʿudi relates.

The archaeology of Harran has yet to yield any evidence that would confirm or deny the existence of such structures; the notion, on the other hand, of a correlation between geometric form and the various heavenly bodies, the view of the cosmos as a mathematical construct with each constituent part in harmony with the whole, had a long history in Greek philosophy, especially among the Pythagoreans, and these celestial concerns found their way, as we shall see, into various aspects of the traditions concerning the practices and beliefs of the Harranians. The mathematical construction of the cosmos by the Pythagoreans became part of the secret language of the esoteric sciences; thus, the form of each planetary temple described by Masʿudi, then, can be seen as a building block that allows the practitioner to create an *imago mundi* within himself and the visible world.

In light of that, it is possible to understand another traditional source for the connection between the cosmic symbolism of geometric forms and a Sabian Hermeticism in Dimashqi's statement that the Sabians believe that two of the Egyptian pyramids, to which they make pilgrimages, contain the graves of the Agathodaimon and Sabi, the son of Hermes.[38] The hidden meaning of the relationship between the geometric shape and cosmic function of the pyramids had long been a matter of speculation among those Greeks who sought to discover the principles of cosmic unity; the later Greek tradition argued that many of the pre-Socratics had gone to Egypt to obtain that knowledge.

---

[36] Chwolsohn II, 446.
[37] Chwolsohn II, 380–396.
[38] Chwolson II, 409.

Harran and the Esoteric Sciences

Astrology

Of all the scientific doctrines inherited by the Muslims from the Near Eastern world of late antiquity, none was as closely identified with Harran and the Sabians as the contemplation and interpretation of the movements of the heavenly bodies, although Muslim views on what the Harranians really believed about the heavens ranged from star worship grounded in pagan ritual to celestial magic to adherence to a Neoplatonic-Hermetic doctrine couched in astral terms.

We have already noted the different levels at which astrology had been practiced and the various traditions that had contributed to its preeminence among the disparate elements of the population in that earlier period: the planetary deities of Mesopotamia; the importance of the sun in Arab cult and Persian doctrine; the mystery cults, especially that of Mithra; the syncretized cosmic doctrines of the philosophical schools, most notably Stoicism, Neopythagoreanism and later Platonism, which in turn had drawn upon earlier Greek science for their physical theories. Stoicism especially played a central role, with its belief in a cosmic *heimarmene*, revealed through the orderly progression of the heavens.

But it is also necessary to remember that the esoteric science of astrology required the rational science of astronomy, and throughout antiquity we find those who were masters of both. The Mesopotamian priestly astrologers were probably the first, but the Greek paradigm is, of course, the second century C.E. Ptolemy, who produced both the *Almagest* and the *Tetrabiblos*. The former work contained the mathematical foundations on which all later, including Islamic, astronomy was based; the latter was a rationalist argument for the validity of astrology. It was this same dual perception of the heavens that at least some Muslim scientists made the basis of their own speculations; Biruni both devised computational tables for calculating the calendar and composed the *Instruction on the Elements of Astrology*. What made the premises of astrology acceptable to at least some Muslim savants was that they were grounded in a belief in the unicity of a living cosmos, which happened to be made manifest in the effects of planetary influences.

Muslim astrology had as many roots as had the discipline in late antiquity. In the seventh chapter of the *Catalog*, Ibn al-Nadim

includes among his list of scholars a number of authors of works on astrology, and their places of origin make clear the variety of sources that Muslim scholars had to draw upon: Persian, Indian, Jewish and Greek—all were given due credit for their contributions. The *Almagest* was translated into Arabic for the first time in the *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* of Harun al-Rashid under the patronage of the formerly Buddhist Barmacids, but it is reported that even earlier, Masha'allah, a convert from Judaism, and the Persian Nawbakht had calculated for Manṣur the most propitious time for the laying of the foundations of Baghdad on July 30, 762 C.E.

In some circles, astrology had a primeval history as well, for it was the Hermetic science *par excellence*, and Ibn al-Nadim in this section cites not only five works on the subject attributed to Hermes, but also includes as authors Tinkalus and Tinqarus of Babylon. According to Ibn Nawbakht, the former had been one of the seven wise men of Babylon; the latter, the keeper of the shrine of Mars. The Harranians must have contributed to the development of Muslim astrology, but to what extent they influenced the Hermetic interpretation of the discipline cannot be known. Foremost among the Harranian students of astronomy were Salm (9th century C.E.), Thabit ibn Qurrah (d. 901 C.E.) and Battani (d. 929 C.E.). All seem to have followed the rationalist approach of Ptolemy.

Salm (or Salman), the director of the *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* under Ma'mun, was a translator of Aristotle and expert on Ptolemy. He traveled to Byzantium in search of Greek works of science, but perhaps he already knew something of the Persian tradition of astrology, for he was also fluent in Pahlevi. The star science of Battani, "a Sabian whose origin was at Harran," was also strictly rationalistic in its foundations, or so it seems from the titles of the works listed under his name in the *Catalog*: *Astronomical Tables*, *Knowledge of the Risings of the Zodiacal Signs in the Quarters of the Heavens*, and *Verification of the Times of Conjunctions*. According to Ibn al-Nadim, he compiled astronomical tables, having observed the fixed stars for almost 50 years.

An expertise in such matters merely served to enhance the Harranians' reputation as the possessors of esoteric knowledge; and the great learning of the Harranians was thought by at least some to embrace another of the Hermetic sciences: alchemy, whose overt and concealed aim was the transformation of substances.

Alchemy

Not surprisingly, perhaps, on the Muslim lists of alchemy's patron founders were those names which appear so often in the Hermetic tradition, and although as with much of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, alchemy's path into Islamic science is obscure, its historical antecedents are not, for it had its roots in both rational science and magical ritual. It is the name of the 7th century Byzantine alchemist Stephanos which provides us with one of our few clear indications of the means by which the Muslims became aware of the alchemical corpus.

As already noted, it was the Ummayad prince Khalid ibn Yazid (d. 704 C.E.) who "ordered a group of Greek philosophers living in in a city of Egypt to come to him. . . ⟨and⟩ commanded them to translate the books about the Art (*al-ṣinaᶜah*, i.e., alchemy) from the Greek and Coptic languages into Arabic. This was the first translation in Islam from one language into another."[39] Khalid is said to have studied "the Art" with a Christian by the name of Morienus (or Marianus), who himself was a pupil of Stephanos. In addition to the Alexandrian connection, however, there were other places where alchemy made its way into the esoteric Islamic sciences, for traces of Assyrian, Syriac and Persian influence in Muslim alchemical texts have pointed to Harran, Nisibis and Jundi-Shapur as likely points of contact.[40]

Alchemy early on became an interest of the more radical Shiᶜite groups; it is easy to see the connections that must have been made between *ẓahir* and *baṭin*, and the exterior and interior meaning of metallurgical transmutation. The members of the circle that gathered around Jaᶜfar al-Ṣadiq were some of the earliest Muslim students of "the Art," and Jaᶜfar himself was reputed to be the author of a number of alchemical treatises. His most famous student was the Persian Jabir ibn Ḥayyan (b. circa 721 C.E.), under whose name a vast corpus of alchemical writings circulated in the medieval period in both the east and west, although many of the works attributed to Jabir have been demonstrated to have been the likely product of a later Ismaᶜili tradition.

An alchemist in the court of Harun al-Rashid and closely asso-

---

[39] Dodge, *Fihrist*, 581.

[40] E.J. Holmyard, *Alchemy*, (London, 1957), 66.

ciated with the Barmacids, the Shi'ite Jabir gave credit for his knowledge to the alchemical works attributed to Balinus (Apollonius of Tyana) as well as the usual cast of Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, at least, once again, as Jabir understood the Aristotelian corpus. The Muslim perception, at least, of alchemy's history is revealed by Jabir, who made note of an assembly held by Hermes, Pythagoras, Socrates, Aristotle and Democritus in order to discuss the hidden meaning of the science.

Other lines of transmission are not so clear, for relatively few Arabic texts are obvious translations of extant Greek alchemical works, and it has been suggested that at least some whose Greek originals are lost may have undergone an intermediate translation into Syriac before they passed into Arabic. There seems to have been as well an indigenous Syriac alchemical literature, which had its roots in both ancient Mesopotamian planet worship and economics; and Harran has been cited as a likely candidate as one of the places where this literature was produced in the pre-Islamic period. Not only was it, of course, the site of one of the most important cults of the Moon god, but early on it had become an important market for metals and minerals; it has been suggested that at Harran, as elsewhere, there were secret guilds of metal workers whose rituals may have focused on the connection between the celestial and terrestrial metals. Alchemy may have its rationalist origins in the development of the transforming techniques of metallurgy, the knowledge of which was kept a closely-guarded secret by its practitioners, who were believed to change the form of their natures even as they accomplished the externals of their craft.[41]

Thus, there are two sources for the Muslim interpretations about alchemy and Harran: the city's traditions of Hermeticism, both theoretical and practical, and the much older worship of the planetary deities. Ibn al-Nadim's account of "the Head" (*al-Raʾs*) demonstrates that dual heritage. According to the Christian Abu Yusuf Ishaᶜ al-Qatiyᶜi, when Maʾmun visited Harran, he accused the inhabitants of being "Adherents of the Head," who had lived in the days of his father, Harun al-Rashid (786–809 C.E.). Following this story, Ibn al-Nadim provides an explanation of the meaning of "the Head." It referred to the head of a man who resembled ᶜUṭarid

---

[41] M. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago, 1978), ch. 7.

(Mercury), "in accordance with what they believed about the looks of the forms of the planets." The man was seized and was placed in a solution of oil and borax, until his joints relaxed, and

> His condition was such that if his head was pulled, it could be lifted without tearing what it was fastened to. . .This they did every year when Mercury was at its height. They supposed that the soul of this individual came to his head, because of (his resemblance to) ʿUṭarid. It spoke with its tongue, relating what was happening and replying to questions. They supposed that the individual's nature fitted and resembled the nature of ʿUṭarid more than that of other living creatures, being more closely related to him than to others in connection with speech, discernment, and other things they believed him to possess.[42]

Dimashqi gives a similar account of a "prophetic head," in this instance concerning a man with the physical characteristics associated with the planet Mars.[43] In addition, the *Ghayat al-Ḥakim* (*The Aim of the Sage*), an eleventh century Arabic compendium of celestial magic which drew upon the Jabirian corpus, contains two descriptions of severed heads used for divinatory purposes that contain striking parallels to the account of "the Head" found in the *Catalog*; the first is found in the account of Indian astrology (although both de Goeje and Plessner argued that the text belonged to the section on the Sabians), the second in the chapter dealing with the Sabians themselves.[44] In the first, the head is placed "opposite the head of the dragon," the symbolism of which expression connects it to Hindu astrological doctrine; it also resembles, of course, the *ouroboros*, the alchemical dragon who swallows his own tail, its body having first undergone a treatment remarkably similar to that described in the *Catalog*.[45] The second, much shorter in length, seems to be connected, like that account in Dimashqi, to the planet Mars, in that the unlucky victim is blinded. The anonymous author of the *Aim of the Sage* credited the institution of the ritual to "a philosopher known under the name of Brahma the Brahman, who died in India."[46] The authorship of the *Aim of the Sage* was attributed by Muslim sources to the Spanish astronomer and mathematician Majriti

---

[42] Flügel, 321; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 753–54.

[43] Chwolsohn II, 388.

[44] The work had a very interesting career in a Latin epitome, entitled the *Picatrix*. See W. Hartner, "Notes on the Picatrix," *Isis* 56 (1965), 438–51.

[45] Willy Hartner, "Notes on the Picatrix", 448.

[46] de Goeje, "Nouveaux Documents," 364.

(d. ca. 1005); Dozy and de Goeje, however, proved a mid-eleventh century date of composition. Pingree suggests that the *Epistles* of the Ikhwan al-Ṣafaʾ and the *Aim of the Sage* had a common source.

Clearly, none of these accounts can be taken literally, for it is hardly likely that Muqtadir (*Aim of the Sage*), Harun al-Rashid or Maʾmun would have permitted the cult to survive if they practiced such rites. These accounts, then, may be interpreted either as a form of religious propaganda, for human sacrifice is a rather common charge against one's enemies, or as part of the symbolism of an esoteric doctrine. The earliest Christians had been so accused, as were later the Jews; and according to the Chronicle of the Jacobite Bishop, Dionysius of Tel Mahre, the Manichaeans, who had a temple at Harran, were accused in 765 C.E. of a similar practice.[47]

But within the context of the esoteric traditions surrrounding the Harranians, the tale of "the Head" may be merely a prosaic, if horrific, version of astrological or alchemical symbolism, reminiscent of the language found in Zosimus and other works on the esoteric sciences. It also has affinities with certain aspects of apotropaic magic which found its way into Hermeticism. Proclus, for example, reports that Julianus the theurgist placed on the demarcation line against the barbarians a human head made out of clay and consecrated by him; it was said to have the power of sending down lightning upon the enemy whenever they wished to cross the border of the Empire.[48]

Confirmation of a theurgistic purpose in the *Catalog*'s account of "the Head" is found in the fact that Ibn al-Nadim mentions in connection with this head a book which the Harranians possessed, entitled *al-Ḥatifi*, containing instructions not only for the preparation of the head, but for all sorts of incantations, spells, magic knots, talismans etc., all of which are the customary tools of the trade for those practitioners of Hermetic magic. de Goeje suggested a reading of *Kitab al-Ḥanif* for the title of the work, pointing out that in the *Aim of the Sage*, those invoking the god Jupiter are instructed to carry on their necks *Kitab al-Ḥanif*. Such a reading would support the reported argument of Thabit ibn Qurrah on behalf of his fellow believers, in which he used that term.

---

[47] Chwolsohn II, 130.

[48] H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, nouvelle edition par M. Tardieu (Paris, 1978), 247.

The "Brethren of Purity" and the Harranians

An extremist offshoot of the *Shiʿat ʿAli* provides a further opportunity to consider not only the possible connections between the Harranians and Islamic Hermeticism, but also at least one Muslim version of what might conceivably be Harranian doctrine. It was perhaps in the tenth century at Basra that yet another Muslim vision of cosmic reality took form, concealed in the *Epistles* of the so-called "Brethren of Purity" (*Ikhwan al-Ṣafaʾ*).[49] Although the sources of the Brethren's doctrine and the authorship of the *Epistles* are still a matter of debate, it is clearly a vision filtered through Hermetic and gnostic perceptions, and in all likelihood represents an extremist Ismaʿili position, although there are some points of difference. The self-reported connection between their doctrine and that of the Harranians provides another illustration of the extent to which theological perspective helps to determine interpretation.

Medieval Muslim authors saw the origins of the Brethren's doctrines in sources ranging from the rationalist Muʿtazilites to the radical Nuṣayris, an Ismaʿili sect whose beliefs still bear the traces of an ancient Semitic paganism.[50] Evidence of the influence of scholastic Greek philosophy can, likewise, be found in the *Epistles*, especially in the realm of "natural" science, but it would seem that the Brethren were just as interested in the esoteric strands of their philosophical inheritance; they defined knowledge not only as the rationalist tradition of human wisdom, but as *ḥikmah*, a divine wisdom granted through revelation. It is "the means which again draws the elite of men or the angels on earth near to the creator Most High,"[51] a view which resonated not only in Hermetic doctrine but among the late antique Pythagoreans and Neoplatonists. The intent of their study of philosophy can be discerned, then, not only in those tracts that dealt with the "Sciences of Natural Bodies," but in those that concerned themselves with the esoteric sciences both theoretical and practical, as well as in their liturgy which contained a philosophical hymn variously titled a "prayer of Plato," a "supplication of Idris," or a "secret prayer of Aristotle."

In a masterful study of the beliefs of the Harranians as described

---

[49] *Rasaʿil Ikhwan al-Ṣafaʾ* (*Epistles*), 12 vols. (Beirut, 1957).
[50] R. Dussaud, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairis* (Paris, 1900).
[51] *Epistles* I, 221.

in *Epistle* IV and those of the Sabians recounted by Shahrastani in his *Book of Creeds and Sects*, Yves Marquet has been able to demonstrate not only that Shahrastani's account of Harranian doctrine showed many parallels with those promulgated by the Brethren of Purity, but that at least some of these teachings credited to the Harranians formed the actual basis of the Brethren's own perception of reality.[52] The Brethren themselves revealed what they regarded as their philosophical lineage in their account of the doctrines that they ascribed to the sages of Harran, whose inhabitants they labeled as Greek: "These Greeks have among men different names, among others 'Sabians,' 'Harranians,' and 'Ḥanifs'"[53]

Another indication of the source of their understanding of the history of Greek philosophy may be found in their assertion that their teachings were derived from those of Pythagoras, whom they identified as a monotheist who was a native of Harran. The association of the philosopher with Harran was not a new idea; the Talmudic tradition claimed that it was from the Jews at Harran that he had gained his wisdom. According to the Brethren, these Greek scientists had received their doctrine from the Syrians and the Egyptians,[54] a line of transmission that, as we have already seen, always had been valued highly in the Hermetic tradition, and which in fact, as Marquet points out, "correspond dans une certaine mesure a une realite,"[55] since it was, by and large, the Greeks who had imported the Hermetic doctrines of Hellenistic Alexandria into Northern Mesopotamia. Further evidence of the Hermetic interpetation of the Harranian doctrine by the Brethren of Purity is revealed by the names of those whom they maintained were the founders of this "Greek" doctrine: Agathodaimon, Hermes, Homer and Aratos (who are all also listed by the *Catalog* among the prophets of the Harranians), by now all familiar figures in the sacred "history" of Hermetic knowledge.

According to the *Epistles*, the Harranians posited a finite universe made up of nine concentric spheres; they maintained that the Creator has placed terrestrial affairs under the governance of the various

---

[52] Y. Marquet, "Sabeens et Iḫwan al-Ṣafaʾ," *Studia Islamica* 24 (1966), 35–80, and 25 (l966), 77–109.

[53] *Epistles* IV, 295. These last two designations rest upon Marquet's emendations of the text.

[54] *Epistles* IV, 295.

[55] Marquet, "Sabeens et . . .," 52.

planets, who were in turn ruled by spiritual beings; that there are divine souls, both good (angels) and bad (demons), not attached to anything corporeal because they are too elevated, to which sacrifices may be made in order to either obtain favors from the angels or to neutralize the evils of the demons; that the heavenly bodies have souls that affect the terrestrial world by both their souls and the nature of their bodies; that each planet has a sympathetic bond to terrestrial matter, especially to various metals and stones, that may be called upon through a combination of astrological knowledge and "natural" acts (i.e., talismans and the like) to gain what one needs from that particular planet; that the individual dispositions of both humans and animals are under the governance of a particular planet; that human souls after death undergo a period of torment and purification and return once again to earth in either human or animal form. Finally, the Sabians have erected a total of 87 temples to the planets in their various zodiacal exaltations, as well as to those souls that are not attached to bodies, and to which they have applied the same pattern of the heavenly bodies.

The Brethren's account of Sabian doctrine recalls at several points the description provided by Sarakhsi in the *Catalog*, who comments that they make offerings to the planets, which have been established by the Creator as mediators for the management of affairs in the sub-celestial world. Sarakhsi is quoted elsewhere as saying that the Harranians believe that the "guiding forces are seven and twelve."[56] Such agreement, of course, may arise out of an interpretation of Sabian doctrine shared by Sarakhsi and the Brethren of Purity and constructed within an Isma'ili framework. The possibility of another interpretation presents itself in that, according to the *Catalog*, on the 30th day of Kanun al-Awwal, the priest of the Harranians climbs a pulpit with nine steps and delivers a sermon and prays for the revival of the religion of 'Uzuz ('Uzza?). Do the nine steps represent the celestial spheres?

Marquet posits an interesting, although ultimately unprovable, link between the Brethren and the Sabians, suggesting that it was due to Harranian influence that the Brethren linked Enoch, the seventh prophet after Adam, with Hermes. In Shahrastani's account of an imagined dialogue between a *ḥanif* and a Sabian, the

---

[56] Muṭahhar, *Bad'*, I, in Rosenthal, *Aḥmad b. at-Ṭayyib as-Saraḫsi*, 36.

ḥanif says that the Sabians believe that Hermes rose up to the world of the souls, and then returned to earth. Maintaining that no other Hermetic text mentions such an ascension by Hermes, Marquet sees the Jewish apocryphal *Book of Enoch*, in which Enoch travels with angels through the heavens and across the earth, as the source for this portrayal of Hermes; he argues that the Harranians "utilisaient le livre d'Henoch aussi bien que les ecrits d'Hermes," and that Enoch-Idris-Hermes as the seventh after Adam would generally fit the Ismaʿili cycles of *Imam* and *mahdi* as described above and the Brethren in particular.[57] Lending support to such an interpretation, of course, is that the number seven is one of *the* special numbers in the ancient planetary cults and later Greek philosophy, a point that was probably not lost at all on either the Brethren or the Harranians.

In such a comparison, nevertheless, one must keep in mind that both Shahrastani and the Brethren in all likelihood drew inspiration from the Ismaʿilis, whose tendency toward such an interpretation of ancient wisdom we have already noted. In addition, despite the professed links specifically to the ancient wisdom of Harran, the postulates of the Brethren of Purity, like those of other Hermetic systems, were necessarily eclectic, for the premise of Hermeticism is that it provides the key to all knowledge, past, present and future, in whatever form it may be expressed. Their recognition of that fact is found in their assertion that

> We have drawn our knowledge from four books. The first is composed of the mathematical and natural sciences established by the sages and philosophers. The second consists of the revealed books of the Torah, the Gospels and the *Qurʾan* and the other Tablets brought by the prophets through angelic revelation. The third is the books of nature which are the Ideas in the Platonic sense of the forms of creatures actually existing, from the composition of the celestial spheres, the division of the Zodiac, the movement of the stars, and so on . . . to mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and the rich variety of human industry. . . The fourth consists of the Divine books which are in intimacy with the chosen beings, the novel and purified souls.[58]

This rather sweeping account of the sources of their doctrine provides some illumination of the arcane processes of the philosophical

---

[57] Marquet, "Sabeens et . . .," 59.
[58] *Epistles* IV, 6.

and religious synthesis that had taken place by the end of antiquity and that had found a home in at least one branch of Islam. Indeed, in this same *Epistle*, it is stated: "It befits our brothers that they should not show hostility to any kind of knowledge or reject any book. Nor should they be fanatical in any doctrine, for our opinion and our doctrine embrace all doctrines, and resume all knowledge."[59]

The Brethren knew of many prophets and many revelations, which had now been incorporated into the revelation of Islam, but which could serve as steps along the way to total spiritual illumination. Nevertheless, it has been suggested by Marquet and others that the Harranians were in fact the conduit through which Greek philosophy passed, albeit in transmuted form, to the Brethren of Purity.[60] Marquet argues that although there were a number of differences between the doctrines of the Brethren and the *Epistle*'s account of Harranian "philosophy," which he describes as a melange of Hermetic magic and philosophy infiltrated by Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism and Stoicism, nevertheless the teachings of the Harranians served as the basis for those of the Brethren. The points of Harranian doctrine rejected by the Brethren were only those which were unacceptable to Islam: a belief in the eternity of the world, a hierarchy of perfect spiritual beings, and metempsychosis, among others.

What supports such an interpretation is the possibility that the Brethren's ties to the Harranians may have been closer even than they were willing to admit; the authors of the *Epistles* do not, on the whole, elsewhere reveal the philosophical sources of their doctrines, and the Harranians indeed may have been the source if, as the Brethren maintained, parts of the *Epistles* were formulated in the eighth century, prior to Islamic translation activities in the ninth. Harran would have been an ideal location for such a transfer of these doctrines. Marquet further suggests that the Harranians were the source of the Brethren's capsule history of Greek philosophy, and that that history was part of the oral tradition of those Harranians whose ancestors had been Greek.

The existence of an oral tradition is notoriously hard to prove, but

---

[59] *Epistles* IV, 105.

[60] e.g., S. Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrine*; and J.B. Segal, "The Sabian Mysteries."

at the very least, it has already been demonstrated that the study of Greek philosophy had long been a part of the intellectual life of the region. One may also add that the specificity of the connection between the Brethren of Purity and Harran is bolstered by the fact that the *Epistles*' review of the Sabians not only specifically refers to Harran, but concludes with a description of several Harranian rites and customs also mentioned by the *Catalog*, including the festival celebrated at Dayr Kadhi, as described above.

Coming out of the same psychological milieu and perhaps dependent upon the same literary traditions that produced the *Epistles* is the *Aim of the Sage,* which contains a chapter on the purported planetary doctrines of the Sabians.[61] It is a melange drawn from a number of Arabic works on various aspects of the Hermetic tradition, including those of Jabir, and following that tradition, seeks in its opening chapter to establish a "philosophical" basis for the practice of various sorts of theurgistic magic. The philosophy upon which it draws is Neoplatonic in its predication of the hypostases of the One, but also present are elements of Aristotelian and Stoic physics.

Underpinning the entire work is the central notion of a pervasive cosmic sympathy: as above, so below. And every aspect of magic, both theoretical and practical, depends on this interrelatedness of the terrestrial and celestial; theoretical magic concerns itself with the knowledge of the heavens, while the practical deals with the materials of nature. Martin Plessner has pointed out a number of parallel passages in the *Epistles* and the *Aim of the Sage*, especially notable in the exposition of the correspondences between parts of the human body and those of the macrocosm.[62]

According to the author of the *Aim of the Sage*, it was a "master of ancient times" who divided the magical arts into three fields: talismans, the worship of the planets, and incantations, each of which became the specialty of a particular people. In the manner of Hermetic literature, the compendium makes the claim that it contains a lost knowledge retrieved from a hidden past: "I set forth such miraculous and confusing matters from all the sciences for this reason only, that you may be purified for the earnest study of these

---

[61] D. Pingree, "Some of the Sources of the *Ghayat al-Ḥakim*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XLIII (1980): 1–15.

[62] M. Plessner, *Picatrix* (London, 1962), lxi.

marvelous arts and may achieve what the ancient sages achieved and attain the heights that they attained."[63]

Book III, chapter Seven of the work presents the Sabians' invocations of the planetary powers; its main source is a work by Tabari, an astronomer who is otherwise not identified. Recorded are not only the texts of prayers to the planets, but recipes for various kinds of incense whose composition compels the attention of the particular ruling spirit. The eclectic nature of the sources of the prayers is demonstrated by the variety of names invoked: each planet is given its Arabic, Persian, Indian, Greek and Roman name. The chapter concludes with an account of other purported Sabian practices, all of which appear in other sources, including child sacrifice, the initiation of young men into the mystery, offerings to Mars and Saturn, and the preparation of a head for divinatory practices. Although, by and large, the associations of various personalities and occupations, plants and metals, would seem to belong to a rather generic form of celestial magic, two points argue for a more specific reference to the Harranians. The first is the similarity to the *Epistles'* account of Harranian ritual practices, which are themselves confirmed in many places by the *Catalog*; the second is that the initiation ceremony, which we will discuss in the next chapter, specifically mentions the city of Harran, while the account of the divinatory head is set at Dayr Kadi itself.

Immediately following the account of the talismanic planetary magic of the Sabians, there is a description of the practices of the "Nabataeans," drawn, for the most part, from a work entitled *Kitab al-Filaḥa al-nabaṭiya* (*Nabataean Agriculture*). Its title is deceptive, for it deals not with the natural practices of agriculture, but with the hidden properties of natural things. It is a remarkable melange of hermetic magic, prophecy and divination that made the familiar claim to be a translation from "the language of the Chaldaeans;" its esoteric Greek antecedents are clearly visible as well, for its views of the heavens show the influence of a syncretistic Neoplatonism. Attributed to Abu Bakr ibn Waḥshiya, it was more likely the product of the ninth-century Shiᶜite Abu Ṭalib Ahmad ibn al-Zayyat, who claimed that the translation had been dictated to him by Ibn Waḥshiya.

The estimates of its value as a source for "Nabataean" and

---

[63] Plessner, *Picatrix*, lxv.

perhaps pre-Islamic Harranian religion have ranged wildly.[64] Although Chwolsohn took its supposed pedigree seriously, many scholars have since dismissed it as a product of pre-Islamic Mesopotamia, although some have seen in it the preservation of earlier materials, perhaps dating to the 6th century C.E. Even the existence of its presumed translator, Ibn Waḥshiya, has been called into question; Nöldeke argued that the entire work was a forgery of the 10th century C.E., but more recent scholarship has attempted to "rehabilitate" the text by investigating its possible sources.[65] Whatever the historical value of the work, however, its supposed author was categorized by Ibn al-Nadim among the practitioners of the "Art" and cites him as one who knew how to make "the head" and the perfected elixir.

Its use as a source for the Harranians is problematic, however, given the generic descriptions of planetary cult and idol worship that it contains. The extract contained in the *Ghayat al-Ḥakim* focuses on the Nabataean prayer to Saturn as well as the magical power of the planets, but what connection it has to the previous chapter is difficult to determine.

Conclusions

Although Henri Corbin drew a direct connection between "sabianism" and Ismaʿili belief,[66] and Louis Massignon had pursued that same line of inquiry, suggesting that the latter doctrine owed much to the Sabians,[67] it is important to remember that the Muslim accounts of Harranian belief that would support such an interpretation were most often written by those who were most interested in discovering, for whatever reason, esoteric doctrines among the Harranians. In addition, one must be careful not to classify Harranian beliefs, even as presented by Sarakhsi, as derived only from the Hermetic tradition, for clearly other forces are at work as well.

What complicates the attempt to sort out the various strands of the

---

[64] F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifftums* IV, 318–329.

[65] M. Plessner, "Der Inhalt der *Nabataischer Landwirtschaft*: ein Versuch Ibn Waḥsija zu Rehabilitieren," *Zeitschrift für Semistic und Verwandte Gebiete* VI (1928), 27–56.

[66] H. Corbin, "Rituel Sabeen et Exegese ismalienne du rituel," *Eranos Jahrbuch* XIX (1950), 181–246.

[67] L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1954).

Harranian tradition as described by Masʿudi, Dimashqi, Sarakhsi and others in the *Catalog*, as well as the Brethren, is the fact that, just as in late antique Hermeticism as a whole, there seems to be a curious discrepancy in the various accounts between Sabian doctrine and practice. Certainly late antique Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism had already blurred the boundaries between philosophical school and religious sect as well as between magic and prayer, but the existence and persistence of ancient forms of sacrifice, feasts and fasts would seem to point to the continued surival of ancient Mesopotamian practices, in whatever way now transformed and given new meaning by later accretions of esoteric doctrines.

One must not discount the threads of esoteric belief already interwoven in other religious traditions which also found a place in the neighborhood of Harran; the religion of the Harranians may have found a place for Hermetic doctrines because of the previous influence of those localized traditions which, in themselves, contained much that was in sympathy to a Hermetic outlook, ranging from astral magic and the cult of the Moon god to Manichaeanism, Zoroastrianism and the Daysanites. The Brethren had defined the morally and spiritually perfect man as one who was of "East Persian derivation, Arabic in faith, of Iraqi, that is, Babylonian education, a Hebrew in astuteness, a disciple of Christ in conduct, as pious as a Syrian monk, a Greek in the individual sciences, an Indian in the interpretation of all mysteries, but lastly and especially, a Sufi in his spiritual life."[68] By the Muslim period, all these spiritual outlooks were perceived to have come together at Harran.

Furthermore, the question of the extent to which Muslim writers were able or willing to distinguish between actual Harranian practices and symbolic language common to the more general traditions of the esoteric sciences must be raised. The *Epistles* contain an account of what purports to be the mysteries performed by the Harranians, which we will consider shortly, but one must take into account also the nature of the sources used by Muslim authors. Not only were those accounts of the Harranians whose authors reveal a more radical Shiʿite perspective more likely to describe Harranian ideology and rituals in language reminiscent of Hermetic symbolism, but others with a more traditional outlook also may have

---

[68] Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, 31.

misinterpreted what they saw. Those who felt the need for neither Greek rationalism nor mastery of the cosmos were those who most often rejected the claims of the Harranians,[69] while those who delved into the history of every kind of knowledge created the Sabians of Harran, making them the masters of all. Neither view is without merit; neither view is totally true, but we begin to see the extent to which issues that had little to do with whatever the Harranians might have actually believed played a role in Muslim exegesis of their belief and practice.

---

[69] See Guy Monnot, "Sabeens et Idolatres selon ʿAbd al-Jabbar," *MIDEO* XII (1974), 13–48.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MYSTERIES OF THE SABIANS ACCORDING TO MUSLIM SOURCES

Introduction

Two different approaches to Harranian belief have thus far presented themselves in the Muslim sources: the search for evidence of the survival of an ancient Mesopotamian paganism, however concealed it may be beneath later accretions, and an esoteric interpretation of Harranian doctrines which attempts to place them within the context of a Hermetic outlook. The extent to which these two approaches might have found a common ground can be considered by an examination of the accounts found in the *Catalog*, Masʿudi's *The Golden Meadows*, the anonymous *The Aim of the Sage*, the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity of various ceremonies purportedly performed by the Harranians, and which may loosely be categorized as mystery rites.

These texts are not without enormous difficulties, for although each can be interpreted to reflect in one form or another the welter of religious and intellectual traditions to which Harran had been witness, the rituals described contain much material whose meaning is obscure. Furthermore, in comparing the documents, we are hampered by the widely differing nature of our texts. Finally, in the case of the *Epistles*, we must once again keep in mind the extent to which the Brethren's own outlook may have shaped their report of Harranian practices.

The *Catalog* of Ibn al-Nadim

The *Catalog* contains two different references to the performance of a "mystery," although their connection to each other is not entirely clear. First, the calendar of Wahb ibn Ibraḥim makes frequent mention of the celebration of the "Mystery (*al-sirr*) to the North (Shamal)." In addition, Ibn al-Nadim appends to his account of the Harranians what seem to be the *legomena* and *dromena* of a mystery cult whose rites take place in the "House of the Bughadharis" (*Bayt*

al-Bughadhariyin), although the god to whom these devotions are addressed is not directly named. The source of this last text is unknown, for Ibn al-Nadim merely says that they had come into his possession, translated, (presumably from Syriac) into Arabic in a "corrupt and wretched style."[1] Nevertheless, the points of agreement between this text and the "Mystery to the North" described by Wahb ibn Ibrahim are sufficient at least to indicate a common focus of worship.

The "Mystery to the North"

"They have adopted one direction for prayer, which they have fixed towards the North Pole in its course. The intelligent thus seek to inquire for wisdom." So states Sarakhsi, as cited by Ibn al-Nadim, in his account of Sabian doctrine;[2] and, in fact, one of the most obscure references in the *Catalog*'s calendar is that which joins the celebration of the birthday of "the Lord who is the Moon" with the performance of the "Mystery to the North" on the 24th day of II Kanun. In addition, in the months of Ḥaziran and Aylul, this mystery is celebrated on the 27th and 28th.

Although the moon is not mentioned in these two months, we have already noted that the end of the month was traditionally devoted to the Moon god; elsewhere, however, in the calendar, the "Mystery to the North" is several times joined to the worship of the Sun. Wahb ibn Ibrahim reports the following festivals in honor of Shamash, all of which are connected to the celebration of the Mystery to the North. We may compare them with what is marked on the same date in the calendar of Ḥashimi recorded in the *Chronology* of Biruni.

1. *Catalog:* On the 15th of Nisan they celebrate the Mystery to the North with offerings, sun worship, sacrifical slaughter, burnt offerings, eating and drinking.
Chronology: On this day they celebrate the mysteries of al-Simak (a star in the constellation Virgo).
2. *Catalog*: On the first of Ayyar, they make the offering of the mystery of the North, worship the Sun, smell the rose, eat, and drink. On the second day, they hold a feast for Ibn al-Salm (Son of the Idol).

---

[1] Flügel, 326–27; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 769–73.
[2] Flügel, 318; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 746.

Chronology: On the second day is the Feast of Salugha, prince of the Satans.
3. *Catalog*: On the 9th of Shubat, they begin a seven day fast, the first day of which is dedicated to the Sun, the great lord, the Lord of Blessing. During these days they eat no meat and drink no wine. During this month, moreover, they pray only to the North, the jinn, and the devils. (This seven day festival is confirmed by Sarakhsi.)
Chronology: "a minor fast," beginning on the 9th and ending on the 16th. In addition, he records the Feast of the House of the Bridegroom for the Sun on the 10th of Shubat, and on the 22nd, the feast of *mnts* for the Sun. Elsewhere, Ḥashimi records that during the month of II Kanun all invocations, fast and feast days are sacred to the Demons.

In the *Catalog*, then, the worship of the Sun and the Moon have been joined with a form of devotion that seems to have no recognizable antecedents in the earlier accounts of Harranian religious practices. In addition, complicating the question of the relationship between Sin, Shamash and Shamal is the fact that there are a number of references in Wahb ibn Ibrahim's calendar to the Mystery to the North which make no mention of the Moon or the Sun, and indeed, may point in other directions altogether. The celebrations of the mystery not joined to the rites of the Moon or the Sun found in the *Catalog* and their possible correspondences in Biruni include:

1. *Catalog*: On the 27th of Ḥaziran, they perform the mystery to the North, for the deity who makes the arrow fly.
Chronology: On that date is the Feast of the Butcher's house.
2. *Catalog*: On the 17th day of Tammuz, the men perform the mystery of the North to the jinn, the devils, and the deities. They make *turmus* from fine flour, terebinth, raisins, hackberry, and shelled walnuts as the shepherds do.
Chronology: On that date is the Feast of the Nuptials of the Elements. A possible parallel to at least one part of the ritual may be found, however, on the 24th of Ḥaziran when Ḥashimi reports the celebration of the feast of *al-kurmus* or feast of genuflection.
3. *Catalog*: In Ab an infant boy "when he is born to the gods who possess the idols" is sacrificed and made into cakes. "This takes place every year for those who observe the mystery of the North."
4. *Catalog*: During three days in Aylul, they heat water in which they bathe as a great mystery to the North, to the chief of the jinn, who is the greatest divinity. They throw into this water tamarisk, wax, pine, olives, cane and caustic. Then they boil it, accomplishing this as the sun rises, and they pour it over their bodies as magicians do. At this time they slaughter eight lambs, seven to the deities and one to the god of the North. They eat in their assembly and each one drinks seven cups of wine. (The anonymous recorder of the mysteries of the *House* comments

that from seven cups set in a row they take the drink, which is called *yusur*.)

5. *Catalog*: In the 27th and 28th days (of Aylul) they have mysteries, offerings, slaughters, and burnt sacrifices to the North, who is the greatest god, as well as to the devils and the jinn whom he has controlled and scattered, giving them good luck.

Overall, then, the calendar of Wahb ibn Ibrahim refers to the performance of the Mystery of the North in eight months of the year (sometimes twice in a single month); in four of these months, its performance seems unconnected to the Sun or the Moon; in three of these months, the mystery of the North is linked to the *jinn* and the demons. The calendar of Ḥashimi contains no specific reference to Shamal, but given the fact that the rite seems to be linked in some way to a demonology, it is possible that the names of demons are hidden in the obscurity of the text. Ḥashimi's calendar makes several references to demons; in addition to the feast of Salugha, the prince of the Satans, which is celebrated on the second of Ayyar, three days in I Kanun are dedicated to the evil spirits, while the entire month of II Kanun is sacred to them.

Debate over the identity of Shamal and his role in Harranian religion have produced widely differing interpretations of the meaning of the mystery and its sources, and illustrate the range of arguments regarding the sources of medieval Harranian religion. Two approaches suggest themselves: searching for historical antecedents for the role of a god of the North in ancient Mesopotamian religion, and looking for parallels between the mystery to the North and other Near Eastern mystery cults.

Some have seen the mystery to the North as having its origins in earliest Semitic religion, reflective of a particular psychological orientation to the cosmos. In an Ugaritic myth, the celebration of Baal's victory over Yam is celebrated on Mount Zaphon (North), and it was on Mt. Zaphon that Baal's body was buried by Anath.[3] In Mesopotamia generally, the North was associated with light, while darkness ruled in the South; according to the cosmological conceptions of the Sumerians and Akkadians, the gods lived in the North, while the South was the location of the nether world and the abode of the demons.[4] This orientation was adopted by both the

---

[3] S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (London, 1963), 82–85.

[4] G. Widengren, *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism* (Uppsala, 1946), 39.

Mandaeans and the Manichaeans: "All the world calls the North a highland and the South a lowland. For the worlds of darkness lie in the lowlands of the South."[5] Among the Zoroastrians and the Elkesaites, however, the traditional direction of prayer toward is South, for they believe that evil comes from the North; the Elkesaites identify the evil angels of the cosmos with the stars in the northern region of the sky.

The Mysteries of the North and Mesopotamian Demonology

On the other hand, since in the *Catalog* the mystery of the North is so often linked with the *jinn* and the demons (*shayatin*), it is possible to argue an opposing interpretation, that this worship is evidence for the persistence of ancient Mesopotamian demonology. It has been suggested that Shamal is the medieval equivalent of Nergal, which identification would point to the survival and transformation of a much earlier Mesopotamian tradition that linked Nergal with Pazuzu, Lord of the demons.[6] As has already been noted, Assyrian and Babylonian texts identify Nergal with both Saturn and Mars, the former because of the god's connection with the underworld and the latter because of their similarly violent dispositions. Some of the Muslim texts identified Nergal/Mars as the Blind Lord, and the *Aim of the Sage* and the prophecies of Baba the Harranian, both of which give him that title, seem to point to his continued power at Harran:

> In the gate which is situated between east and south, a house of worship will be built, and that upon orders from the power of our Blind Lord. He is the one who commanded me to make these things known to you.[7]

We have already noted the inherently dualistic nature of the Mesopotamian world view, and certainly a belief in the existence and activity of evil spirits, whose numbers are legion and who are everywhere, continued to be a dominant feature of the various manifestations of religious belief in the region.

Survival of an ancient demonology would perhaps shed some light on other parts of the *Catalog*'s account of Harranian beliefs. In "what is what is written in another person's hand" appended to

---

[5] *Ginza Rba*, Bk 11.
[6] H. Lewy, "Points of Comparison," 139–161.
[7] F. Rosenthal, "The Prophecies of Baba the Harranian," 224–225.

Wahb ibn Ibrahim's account, the anonymous compiler lists among the gods of the Harranians *Ḥisab al-Farsiya* (?),[8] the mother of a number of gods, who was accompanied to the seashore by six evil spirits. Lewy has argued that the correct reading of the first element of the name is Ḥarranit, the Harranian political embodiment of the consort of Sin, Ningal, who in Akkadian texts is called the mother of the great gods, thus, in Lewy's view, paralleling her description in the *Catalog*.[9] Pointing to the Babylonian cycle of tales about the seven evil spirits who originate in the nether world and who attempt to overwhelm Sin, Lewy concluded that it is Ningal as the female aspect of the Moon deity which represents the evil principle. While it is true, however, that in ancient Mesopotamian myth, there are seven evil spirits who dwell in the ocean and attempt to attack heaven, there is no indication that the mother of the gods was included among them.

Two other of the *Catalog*'s sources refer to the Seven. The last of the five mysteries of the "House of the Bughadharis" concludes with "This is the mystery of the seven, the unconquerable," without any further identification. Since Ibn al-Nadim notes that a page was missing from the description of the fifth mystery and that the ritual took seven days to celebrate, it is possible that the text originally contained seven mysteries. The number seven also appears several times in Wahb ibn Ibrahim's account:

1. On the eighth day of Nisan, they hold a feast in honor of the seven deities, the devils, jinn, and spirits. Seven lambs are burnt for the seven, a sheep for the Lord of the Blind, and a sheep for the deities who are the devils.
2. On the 20th of Nisan, they sacrifice nine lambs, seven for the seven deities, one for the god of the jinn, and one for the Lord of the Hours. This offering is repeated on the 28th.
3. At the end of Wahb ibn Ibrahim's account, he records that the Harranians state that the seven heavenly bodies, that is, the deities, are males and females "who marry and have passions for one another, and also bring good luck and bad fortune."

At first glance, given the fact that the Lord of the Blind who is Mars is listed separately from the seven in the month of Nisan, it seems that our text is referring to two different meanings for the number

---

[8] Dodge (766) reads ḥitan al-Farisiyah.
[9] H. Lewy, "Points of Comparison," 141.

seven: the seven evil spirits of ancient Mesopotamian religion and the seven planetary deities. Although such an interpretation would be consonant with ancient Mesopotamian demonology, where there are clear distinctions made between evil spirits and the gods, the most important that the former do not respond to prayer, it is possible, nevertheless, that the boundaries between the two kinds of divine beings have become blurred over time. It is also possible for the same object to have multiple layers of meanings: the planets could function in a number of different ways at the same time, one form of interpretation not necessarily negating the others.

We have already seen that to be true in the case of the Moon god; it is obvious that the other gods associated with the planets had a variety of functions as well. Through the processes of syncretism, these functions may seem to be contradictory, but the worshipper is often able to accomodate many, if not all, of them. Thus, within the religion of Harran as described in the *Catalog*, reference to the Seven may be an expression of the persistence of ancient Mesopotamian religion traditionally practiced, of a cult in which the planets endow the initiate with a secret knowledge, or of their transformation into a system resembling that of many gnostic sects, in which the heavens become the visible manifestation of the evil inherent in earthly existence.

Within the calendar of Wahb ibn Ibrahim, there is little to suggest the nature of the actual *dromena* of the mystery, except for ritual bathing in a specially prepared liquid prior to its performance in Aylul. Only one other act mentioned in the calendar seems to be part of the ritual of the mystery. According to the *Catalog*, at the time that they celebrate the birthday of the Moon and the mystery to the North in II Kanun, the Harranians burn rods of pine (*al-dadhi*) for the gods and the goddesses. Both the pine tree and cone are, of course, symbols of eternal life, and appear in the cults of Mithra, Attis and Dionysus, among others, as the embodiment of the prize of immortality.

There is, of course, the text of the five mysteries that is included in Ibn al-Nadim's account of the Sabians; although much of the language is suggestive of the cult of Mithra, the resemblance is in all likelihood coincidental, for the evidence for a historical connection between the cult of Mithra and the mystery to the North is almost all inferential. Before we examine the language of the mysteries contained in the *Fihrist*, it is nevertheless useful to consider the

possibility of both Iranian and Mithraic influence, not only because of an identification of the Persian solar deity with Shamash, and the connection between sun worship and the mystery to the North in Wahb ibn Ibrahim's calendar, but because other minor rituals performed in conjunction with the mystery to the North, as well as a few divine names, seem to indicate some connection to Iranian practices. For example, the calendar of Ḥashimi lists in the month of Ayyar the Feast of Ḍaḥḍak, which may be the Persian Ḍaḥak, a three headed demon in dragon form, who in the *Shahnamah* has become a tyrant of the human race on the shoulders of whom two serpents have made their home.[10]

In addition, the opposition of Nergal and Sin, which is intrinsic to Mesopotamian religion, may strike a responsive chord in Mithraism's emphasis on the tension between darkness (evil) and light (good), although it must be conceded that a dualistic view of the universe is too widespread a phenomenon and appears in so many guises during this period that it is impossible to pinpoint any direct historical transmission. Nevertheless, Biruni traced an elaborate history in order to show the connection between the Persians and the religion of the Sabians, and elsewhere we have already noted the tradition that linked Zoroaster to Harran. To what extent such a connection was either the product of Biruni's Persian background or of a more generalized attempt to synthesize a history of esoteric teachings is ultimately unknowable, and the evidence for such a link as may be found in our texts must be evaluated with extreme caution.

According to Wahb ibn Ibrahim, among the deities honored with an offering on the 20th of Nisan at Dayr Kadi is "Lord of the Hours" (*Rab al-saʿat*), who receives as do the seven deities and the god of the jinn the sacrifice of a lamb. Biruni records a similar feast to the Lords of the Hours on the 9th of Nisan. The most likely identification of the Lord of the Hours is Zurvan, the ancient Iranian deity of Time, the father of Ohrmazd and Ahriman, who stood at the top of the Iranian divine hierarchy and who was linked in his westernized form with Aion, and Kronos (Chronos) or Saturn, but what form his worship might have taken at Harran is not indicated by our texts.

---

[10] R. Levy, *The Epic of the Kings* (London, 1967), 18.

Given the lack of any further explication of the "Lord of the Hours" in the *Catalog*, such an identification must remain problematic, although Zurvan's variegated nature, combining zodiacal astrology, the elements and fate, as well as an all-encompassing celestial sovereignty is sympathetic to the syncretistic impulses of Harranian religion in late antiquity. Two possible interpretations, one Iranian and the other native Mesopotamian, present themselves. The dissident Zurvanites, who have been labelled as representatives of the Persian intelligentsia, posited a universe that was the product of the evolution of formless primeval matter into the finite. The finite quality of the universe was demonstrated by a world bounded by the heavens, in which a battle is waged between the signs of the Zodiac, the forces of good, and the seven planets which attempt to oppress creation.[11] Such an interpretation of the cosmos suggests that Zurvanite doctrine was a product of the contact between Mesopotamian and Persian culture.

The other conjecture about the function of such a deity in Harranian religion leads us back once again to the Mesopotamian Nergal, whose iconography is suggestive of that of the lion-headed, winged, snake-encircled figure commonly identified as the god of Time. The relationship between Mesopotamian religion, Zoroastrianism and the development of Mithraism has long been a matter of debate. A.D.H. Bivar has argued that in its Near Eastern form, the Mithraic cult represents the blending of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian elements and the cult of Nergal, noting both Ahriman, the evil spirit, and the lion-headed figure have attributes in common with the Mesopotamian god of the underworld.[12] Bivar suggests that this figure could, in Mithraic iconography, represent both Zurvan, since time is the slayer of all things, and Ahriman, the enemy of Ahura Mazda and Mithra, who, like Nergal, is a god of pestilence and destruction. It has been elsewhere argued that the snake-encircled figure is in fact Ahriman himself, and represents an expression of Persian religion that arises out of neither Zoroastrianism or Zurvanism. Rather, it is the product of a third type of Iranian devotion, that of the *devasns*, or devil worshippers. Theirs was a radical dualism,

---

[11] see R.C. Zaehner, *Zurvan, A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford, 1955), and J.R. Hinnells, *Persian Mythology* (London, 1973).

[12] A.D.H. Bivar, "Mithra and Mesopotamia," *Mithraic Studies* II (1975), 275–289.

which posited Ahriman as the ruler of the world of time, while Ohrmazd was relegated to an eternity beyond time and space.[13]

Whatever the original identity of this figure, however, it was because of his connection with death and the underworld that the Mithraic Zurvan could be identified not only as Aion/Chronos, but as Kronos/Saturn. The extent to which the boundaries between religion, philosophy and magic as well as among disparate cultures could be blurred is revealed by the fact that the god of Time also played a role in Neoplatonic magic, for Proclus reports that Aion/Chronos was the chief god of the Chaldeans and was described by the theurgists as eternal, infinite, young and old.

The ritualized prophecy that took place on the 27th day of Ḥaziran, when "they perform the mystery to the North, to the deity who makes the arrow fly," may also point to a connection between Mithra in his role as master of the hunt and and the traditions of ancient Mesopotamian religion. On the same day

> they also set up a table on which they place seven portions for the seven deities and the North. The priest brings a bow which he strings, and into which he fixes an arrow to which there is attached a firebrand. It has a flame at its head and is made of wood which grows in the region of Harran. On it there is a piece of cloth upon which the flame is ignited, just as it lights a candle. The priest shoots twelve arrows. Then the priest walks as a dog on his hands and feet, until he fetches the arrow. He does this fifteen times and then makes an augury, that is, he divines that if the firebrand is extinguished, the feast in his estimation is not acceptable. But if it is not put out, then the feast is accepted.[14]

Several ancient Semitic and western sources refer to *belomanteia*, but in every instance it seems to be similar to the casting of lots. We find the ancient Babylonian form of divination described in Ezekiel:

> For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination: he shakes the arrows, he consults the teraphim, he looks at the liver" (21:21).

2 Kings also mentions the use of arrows for a form of prophecy. Josiah, king of Israel, visits the dying prophet Elisha, and he laments the prophet's forthcoming death, for he has in reality led the battle against Syria. The prophet tells the king to fire his arrows out the

---

[13] R.C. Zaehner, "Postscript to Zurvan," *BSOAS* XVII/2, (1955), 232–250.
[14] Flügel, 322; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 758.

window, for it will be "Yahweh's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Syria" (13:14–19). Finally, we are reminded of Ibn al-Kalbi's description of Hubal, the greatest of the idols found in and around the Kaʿbah:

> In front of it were seven divination arrows. . . Whenever they disagreed concerning something, or proposed to embark upon a journey, or undertake some project, they would proceed to the idol and shuffle the divination arrows before it. Whatever result they obtained they would follow and do accordingly.[15]

Leaving aside for a moment the identity of "the deity who lets the arrow fly," it must be conceded that neither of these accounts resemble what is being described in the *Catalog*. Chwolsohn, however, does report that the rabbis explicated the arrows in Ezekiel as meaning "to cast arrows," and adds that in a midrash on *Kohelet*, Nebuchadnezzar is described as having fired arrows in different directions, and they all flew in the direction of Jerusalem.[16] This midrashic tale, in turn, bears an uncanny resemblance to Biruni's explication of the Persian festival of Tiragan, commemorating the settlement of a boundary dispute with the shooting, by a wise and pious man, of an arrow which sailed a remarkable distance and embedded itself in a tree.[17]

Like the wise and pious man of Biruni, Mithra, whose prowess as an archer is described in the Zoroastrian *Avesta*, is the champion of justice, who uses his arrows not only to destroy the enemies of Ohrmazd but to bring forth water from the Living Rock, and in the iconography often is portrayed as the hunter (see, e.g., the Mithraeum at Dura Europus, where he seems to have been worshipped by a troop of archers). As the archer, then, Mithra is the mirror image of Nergal, who fires his arrows to bring pestilence and death.

Reading an Iranian or Mithraic interpretation into the material thus far presented depends, in part, in seeing references to the Sun as Persian in origin as well, but in our discussion of earlier Harranian religion, we have already considered the other sources for the worship of a solar deity. More than a thousand years of cultural contact between Iran and the Semitic near East must have left their mark on both traditions: native Mesopotamian and Syrian elements

---

[15] Ibn al-Kalbi, *The Book of Idols*, 23.
[16] Chwolsohn II, 200.
[17] Biruni, *Chronology*, 220.

insinuated themselves into Persian religious thought, just as the Semitic world view was influenced by the teachings of the *magi*. And although Arab influence is less easy to define, earlier references, in the *Doctrina Addai* for example, to the religion of the Arabs settled in the area around Edessa indicate that they, too, may have contributed their own particular view of the power of the Sun god.[18] Drijvers, in an analysis of the iconography that was used by Bivar to support his thesis of an Iranian-Mesopotamian syncretism, argues that the evidence of solar worship in the region is wholly the result of the survival of an indigenous Semitic tradition that developed independently of Iranian influence.

Another approach to the question of the position of the Sun god in Harranian religion has been made by Jurgen Tubach.[19] In his analysis of the cult of the Sun god at Hatra, Harran and Edessa, Tubach argues for the preeminence of the Sun in the Harranian pantheon as demonstrated by both late antique and Muslim sources. Although he is reluctant to point to the moment at which the Sun replaced the Moon as the dominant deity at Harran, he adduces as evidence not only the testimony of Bar Daysan and Ephrem, as well as the *Nabataean Agriculture* of Ibn Waḥshiya, but also the frequent references to the worship of the Sun in the calendars of both Biruni and Ibn al-Nadim, including the seven day fast to the Sun, "the Great Lord";[20] Sarakhsi's comment that the Sabians offer prayers to the deity three times a day; the fact that Wahb ibn Ibrahim, in his list of daily offerings, begins with *al-Shams*; and Biruni's note to Ḥashimi's calendar that the equinoxes and solstices are Sabian feasts, which is echoed in Dimashqi's remark that spring equinox is a Sabian holiday. He suggests that both native traditions and the importance of the Sun in late antique, especially Neoplatonic, philosophy, were contributing sources to this assumption of preeminence.

In his consideration of the Mysteries to the North, Tubach posits interlocking identifications of Shamal that arise out of both these factors. Pointing out that in esoteric Sabian doctrine as described in Muslim sources, the planets became identified with the various

---

[18] H.J.W. Drijvers, "Mithra at Hatra?," 151–186.

[19] J. Tubach, *Im Schatten des Sonnengottes: der Sonnenkult in Edessa, Harran und Hatra am Vorabend der christlichen Mission* (Wiesbaden, 1985).

[20] This fast is also found in Ibn al-Jawzi, 73.

philosophic abstractions such as Soul, Intellect, Necessity, etc., he argues that the Sun, as ruler over all the other planets, became identified with the First Cause, the original source of all created things, and that the references to the Mysteries to Shamal in the *Fihrist* as well as Sarakhsi's account of their offerings to the planets suggest a similar role. Eventually, Shamal, although not the Sun itself, was linked to it by his role as the controller of all things within this world. Such a relationship between native cult and esoteric philosophy would then explain the seeming contradictions in the varied reports of Harranian practices and beliefs.

Finally, according to Tubach, further confirmation of the association between Shamal and the sun is the fact that adherents of a division of the radical Islamic sect of the Nuṣayris who call themselves Shamalis believe that the abode of ᶜAli is in the sun. Dussaud had reported that for the Shamalis, ᶜAli had replaced the pagan Baᶜal-shamen, and that Shamal, identical to the deity named in the *Fihrist*, represented the sun in its nocturnal course.[21] He suggested, however, that the name derived not from the word meaning North, but from the Hebrew Samael, "le chef des satans."

Tubach is correct in pointing out the increased importance of the Sun god in Muslim accounts of Harranian beliefs and the central importance of the sun in later Neoplatonic doctrine, but ultimately his explication of the meaning of the Mysteries to the North is not completely satisfying for several reasons. Most importantly, he does not adequately consider those references to Shamal which are not explicitly connected to the Sun or which are linked to the Moon god. Secondly, he treats all his sources as of equal value, with little consideration as to their nature. As was noted above, however, the usefulness of *Nabataean Agriculture* as a source for pre-Islamic Harranian religion has been the subject of much disagreement, and although its reputation has been partially redeemed in recent years, its use must be approached with caution.

The Mysteries of the House of the Bughadharis

Although ultimately there is little concrete evidence in the calendar itself to indicate a link between the worship of Mithra and

---

[21] R. Dussaud, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairis* (Paris, 1900).

Harranian religion, the text of the five mysteries that concludes Ibn al-Nadim's account of the Harranians does at the least suggest the use of Mithraic symbolism, despite its possible connection to a localized cult. The second of the mysteries contains the following:

> The priest says to one of the boys, "Have I not given that which you give me and surrendered what you surrendered to me?" Then the youth answers saying, "To the dogs, the ravens, and the ants!" He (the priest) replies to him saying, "What is our obligation to the dogs, the ravens and the ants?" The youth answers, saying, "Oh, priest, they are brothers and the Lord is the victor, to whom we give delight."[22]

All three animals—the dogs, the ravens and ants—play a role somewhere in either the cult of Mithra or ancient Iranian myth. In the iconography, a dog, generally said to symbolize the good creation of Ohrmazd, can often be found, either leaping toward the slain bull of creation, whose blood he is about to drink, or accompanying his master, in the Persian style, as he pursues the hunt. The dog may also be further evidence of a connection between Mithra and Nergal; the latter has already been identified as "the Lord with his dogs" in the fifth century homily of Jacob of Sarug (see above). The raven is the messenger of the sun, and often finds a place in Mithraic iconography; it is also the first of seven ranks of initiation in Mithraic cult. Finally, in the Persian cosmogonical myth, the ants feed upon the slain body of the bull of creation.

Further evidence from the text of the mysteries supporting the identification of the deity with some version of Nergal may perhaps be found in the phrase, "Our Lord is the Vanquisher, and we delight in Him," is repeated several times. The Vanquisher (*al-Qahir*) is an epithet of the planet Mars, whose connection with Nergal we have already seen. If this connection between some form of Mithraic worship and the religion of the Harranians is to hold, however, we must see it in the context of a dualistic view of the cosmos, in which the conflict between Nergal and Sin has been assimilated into that between Ahriman and Mithra. Mithra, as the sun god, has taken on the attributes of Shamash, but also perhaps has absorbed those qualities of Sin which emphasized his opposition to Nergal.

---

[22] Flügel, 326; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 770.

The Mandaeans and the Sabian Mysteries

Before we examine what the Brethren of Purity say about Sabian ritual, it is necessary to take one last look at another possible source for the *Catalog*'s account of the Harranian mysteries, one which leads us back to the original question of the identity of the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* and their relationship, if any, to the Mandaeans and Harranian religion. Chwolsohn had argued that the "true" Sabians were, in fact, the Mandaeans; and although more recent scholarship has rejected such a view, several of the details of cult in the *Catalog* seem seem to be linked to Mandaean practice and belief, even if in a negative way.

In addition, Kurt Rudolph has noted the possible existence of a historical connection between the Mandaeans and Harran. Rudolph believes that the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* were "probably Mandaeans or a group related to them."[23] In addition, he has posited a further connection between this sect and the Sabians of Harran, suggesting that although the cult had its origins in the Jordan valley, its members left Palestine perhaps during the second century C.E. because of orthodox Jewish persecution, and at one point in its wanderings came to Harran. Rudolph has adduced the path of their journey because of what he sees as Parthian and Mesopotamian influence in their ritual and literature.

E.S. Drower pointed out that the Mandaeans themselves seem to have subscribed to that tradition, noting that the *Ḥaran Gawaita* (*Inner Ḥaran*), the account of their history, tells of their journey to their present dwelling place through "the interior of the Ḥaran... that city which has Naṣurai in it." Drower identifies the Naṣurai, which is now a term used for the adepts of the Mandaean faith, as those "skilled in religious matters and white magic, the observers of stars and omens, of constellations and auspices." It was here, says the text, that the Mandaeans "severed themselves from the sign of the seven."[24]

Aside from a similarity between the celebration of the Mandaean New Year and the Mesopotamian *akitu* festival, as well as an extensive Mandaean demonology based on Akkadian prototypes,[25] the

---

[23] K. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 2.

[24] E.S. Drower, *Ḥaran Gawaitha* (London, 1953). See also Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 3–5.

[25] E. Yamauchi, *Mandaic Incantation Texts* (New Haven, 1967), 23.

clearest reference in Wahb ibn Ibrahim's calendar to what seems to be a Mandaean ritual is found in the month of Ayyar: "On the first day of Ayyar, they make the offering of the Mystery of the North, worship the Sun, *smell the rose*, eat and drink."[26]

To the Mandaeans, the North is the source of light, instruction and healing; it is the direction in which they pray, and at death, they are buried with the face turned toward the Polar star. Secondly, although in many ancient pagan religions and among the Christians, the rose is symbolic of eternal life, and Qifti relates it is part of the sacrificial ritual as commanded by Hermes,[27] in the Mandaean system, the rose generally has a negative significance; as the rose fades and dies, so too does the body, and thus it is the symbol of the material nature of the world and its transitoriness. The planets, as the embodiment of evil and rulers of the material world, are clothed with roses.[28]

It is this last fact, the seemingly baleful influence of the planets and the zodiac as recorded in their sacred texts that argues against a Harranian source for Mandaean ideology. From the union of Ruḥa, the demon mother, and Ur, the devil, came successive progenies of 7 and 12. The first were transformed into the planets, the second into the signs of the Zodiac. "I laughed at the planets and at what they planned and did. I dwelt among the Seven but they laid no hand upon me. . . Woe to the planets that scheme wickedness against my chosen ones."[29]

Clearly such a view is nowhere indicated in our sources dealing with Harran; ultimately, whatever similarities we may see between the practices of the Mandaeans and the Harranians may stem from indigenous Mesopotamian traditions drawn upon by both communities. Drower reports, however, that the Mandaeans now believe that the signs of the zodiac and planets contain spirits subservient to the King of Light, and that human beings are under their influence. The most beneficent of the planets is Shamash, who sails across the heavens in his sun-boat, while the Moon god seems to exert a sinister influence. "The face of Sin, the Moon, is like a cat, animal-like and

---

[26] Flügel, 322; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 755.
[27] Chwolsohn II, 530.
[28] K. Rudolph, *Die Mandaer* (Gottingen, 1960), 47.
[29] *Sarh dQabin dSislam Rba. Explanatory Commentary on the Marriage Ceremony of the Great Sislam*, trans. E.S. Drower (Rome, 1950), 63.

black, while the face of Shamish is like a wheel of light."[30] A Mandaean tale recorded by Drower recounts that the knowledge which Sin possesses is a terrible magic, and addds that "for this reason it is forbidden to us to seek to enter into the secrets of Sin." The sources for this revised vision of the role of the heavenly bodies in this world are impossible to determine. As we have observed above, the difficulty in comparing Mandaeans with the Harranians lies in the evolving nature of the former's rituals and beliefs over the past 2,000 years.

The "Brethren of Purity" and the Sabian Mysteries

What connection, if any, do the mysteries to the North have with those that are described by the Brethren of Purity? The *Epistles*' account of the Sabians offer yet another perspective on the difficulty of interpreting Harranian doctrine as presented in Islamic sources. We have already considered their exposition of Sabian philosophy and cosmology, but the Brethren seem to be willing to provide us with a glimpse not only into the theoretical aspects of this esoteric doctrine, but the religious expression of this world view as well.

The account of the initiation ceremony in *Epistle* IV, 301–305, is set within the context of an explication of Harranian cosmological doctrines, manifested in a concrete fashion in the performance of theurgic ritual, but shaped within the framework of earlier Mesopotamian religion. The exposition of Harranian doctrine as presented by the Brethren declares that they maintain that astrology is useless without talismanic magic, while the performance of theurgy is likewise of little purpose without a knowledge of the effect of the heavenly bodies in the terrestrial world. This belief is then illustrated by what purports to be an account of a Harranian initiation ritual, whose accuracy remains unsupported by any corroborating evidence.

It begins with a description of the temple where the ceremony was held, built when the planets were at their propitious moments.[31] Although the temple was divided into separate parts for male and female, we are given an account only of what took place in the room in which the young men were gathered. The room was without

---

[30] Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 79.

[31] *ḥuzuẓ*: Yves Marquet, "Sabeens et . . .," 42.

windows, illuminated only by torches. On the north side were the names of the twelve zodiacal signs as well as representations of the planets, each made of its corresponding material (i.e., that of the sun was gold, that of the moon was silver).

In front of these images were placed on a mat seven white discs; the disc closest to the images was dedicated to the moon and had a single circle, while that which was furthest away, representing Saturn, had seven circles, each of the discs having a number of circles corresponding to the rank of the star in the celestial spheres. Each of the discs held a censer filled with an incense particular to the planet. Completing the setting were a ewer of water and three boughs of tamarisk, an iron knife with an iron handle, and an iron ring on which was engraved an image of *Jurjas*, placed to the left of the planetary images.

The ceremony began the night before with a prayer by the high priest: "O Jurjas of Jurjas, Iblis of Iblis, greatest of the demons, greatest of all the jinn." In their preceding account of Harranian doctrine, the anonymous authors of the *Epistles* explain that the Sabians posit two categories of divine spirits: "one good in its nature, that they call angels, to whom they sacrifice to win their favors; the other bad in its nature, of which they call the individuals "demons;" and they sacrifice to these to neutralize the evil that they can do."[32] Thus, sacrifices offered to the demons would be apotropaic in nature and it is clear from the words of the high priest that this is the function of his prayer:

> We have decided this morning to receive one of our young people in our confession, to allow him to hear the mystery of our angels. Assist us in this ceremony; be a witness for us and against us; avert from us your evil and your calamities; drive away from our ceremony those of your companions who are endowed with deceit and treachery."[33]

After cockcrow on the following morning, one of the young men who were to be initiated was led into the *adyton* along with his guarantor, and stood before the high priest. After a series of questions in which the young man promised to hold fast to his religion and not to reveal its secrets, the priest made as to offer him as a sacrifice, reciting the names of the ten angels in their hierarchical order or the 87 names

---

[32] *Epistles* IV.296.
[33] *Epistles* IV.302.

and that of Jurjas. At that moment, the guarantor stepped forward to offer a substitute pledge, a rooster, in place of the young man. The substitution was accepted; and after marking the young man on his thumb with the iron ring, the priest touched him 99 times with the tamarisk bough. The initiate was then dressed in new white vestments and given salt in the form of a triangle to eat. The ceremony was then repeated for each of the young men who were to be initiated.

It was at this point that he began to reveal the mystery. The *legomena* consisted of two discourses, one intended for the men, the other for the women.

> Both are equal in the number of words and letters. If their words are scattered and then mixed in an order where each word of one is found between two words of the other, there result multiple combinations, of which four contain respectively the laws and proofs of one of the four following sciences: medicine, chemistry, astrology, and the science of talismans.[34]

The account of the Sabians is then concluded by a brief description of other deities, festivals and practices, much of which loosely resembles what is found in the *Catalog* "in another person's handwriting," including the pilgrimage to Dayr Kadhi.

There is much in this performance that is familiar. The setting itself is easily recognizable, for the statues of the planetary gods, the representations of the signs of the zodiac, the seven discs representing the celestial spheres, and demonological and name magic all find their generic antecedents in Chaldaean astrology, late antique Greek philosophy, and Hermetic theurgy as well as Mithraic doctrine. Nevertheless, the text does not yield an easy identification of a particular cult; indeed, as Marquet himself has admitted, every element affords multiple interpretations.

Central to the question is the identity of Jurjas, the Satan of Satans, to whom the high priest addressed his prayer. Marquet has suggested that it might be a masculinized version of the Greek Gorgon, who was mistakenly identified with the triple-faced Hecate, nocturnal goddess of witchcraft and black magic.[35] Hecate was, of course, the deity par excellence of the theurgists, and such an

---

[34] *Epistles* IV.305.

[35] Marquet, "Sabeens et . . .," 86–87.

identification would make sense in light of the Hermetic discourses delivered by the high priest.

It is also possible that Jurjas may conceal as well the Persian Ahriman, who is, similarly, the lord of the demons. Supporting evidence for this view might be adduced from the description of the *adyton*, with its signs of the zodiac and representations of the planets, both of which play, of course, an essential role in Mithraic doctrine. Finally, we can add for consideration the incorporation of either Nergal or some other figure from Mesopotamian demonology who had been given a new life in the Harranian cult described by the *Epistles*.

The accoutrements of the ritual likewise afford a wide variety of meaning, the most notable of which is the cock, sacrificed as a substitute victim for the initiate. The ritual of substitution is so widespread a religious practice in antiquity as to be meaningless, but the choice of the victim has resonances in a number of the religious traditions we have already considered, as well as in both Greek philosophy and Hermetic and gnostic lore.

"Most of their sacrificial victims are cocks." So reports Sarakhsi in his account of the Harranians.[36] Everywhere, the cock stands as a symbol of rebirth and renewal, whose call at dawn signals the victory of light over darkness, night over day, watchfulness over sleep, immortality over death. In traditional Greek religion, it was an apotropaic sacrifice offered to a number of chthonic deities, most notably Persephone and Asclepius. Aristophanes called it the *ornis persikos*,[37] and among the Persians, the cock-like creature Sraosa is the visible manifestation of Ahura Mazda's protection; never-sleeping, always watchful, it guards those who worship the force of Good against the onslaught of the demon Aesma Daeva (who later became the gnostic Asmodeus). In the *Vendidad*, Ahura Mazda proclaims, "That bird lifteth up his voice at the mighty dawn, (saying) Arise men, laud Best Righteousness, contemn the demons."[38]

In late antiquity, the solar associations of the cock drew it into the iconography of Mithra and Sol Invictus as the representation of the rising light that expels the evil of darkness. It was perhaps because of Persian influence that the Pythagoreans identified the cock as the

---

[36] Flügel, 319; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 748.
[37] Aristophanes, *Aves*, 483.
[38] Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (Oxford, 1950), 125.

chaser of demons and forbade its sacrifice. Later theurgists saw its solar affinities, which enabled it to partake of the divine: "He shows it by his perception of the sun's revolutions and by singing a hymn to the luminary as it approaches and turns to the other cardinal points."[39]

These various interpretations come together in the figure generally called Abraxas or Iao, whose representation on a number of late antique magical amulets may have some affinity with that of the Sabians' Jurjas, whose likeness was engraved on a gemstone of the high priest's ring. The divinity is generally portrayed as having a cock's head, a human body, but with feet formed from serpents, the three parts thus symbolizing the heavenly light, earth and the underworld. Although commonly identified as a gnostic demon, it is more likely that Abraxas is the product of a more generalized magical outlook that permeated every kind of esoteric doctrine in late antiquity, including the theurgistic practices of the philosophers.

At the same time, however, that the cock may have played a central role in the cult of Mithra or gnostic-Hermetic theurgy, its earliest function as some sort of apotropaic offering was not discarded. Both the *Catalog* and the *Epistles* (IV, 306) report that it was the Harranians' custom to preserve the left wings of the cocks sacrificed at these mysteries in order to fashion amulets which they hang "on the necks of the boys and the collars of the women, as well as at the waists of pregnant women, believing this to be a great safegurd and protection."[40] In this regard, one of the more peculiar rituals contained in the calendar of Wahb ibn Ibrahim may point to a connection between this more primitive form of apotropaic magic and the Mystery to the North. On the 26th of Aylul, whoever is bound by a vow to the Lord of Fortune (Rab al-Baht) fastens a burning firebrand on the wing of a cock or young chicken, sending it forth to the god. If the bird is consumed in the flame, it signifies the acceptance of the offering; if the brand is extinguished, the vow has been rejected.[41]

The account of the month begins with the statement that on three of its days the Harranians perform the Mystery to the North; what follows are descriptions of three festivals, two of which, on the 27th

---

[39] Proclus, *Concerning the sacred art among the Greeks* in Bonner, 127.
[40] Flügel, 325–26; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 767.
[41] Flügel, 323; Dodge, *Fihrist*, 760.

and 28th, are clearly the celebration of the mystery. It is likely, then, that the account of the third day, the 26th, on which offerings are made to Rab al-Baht, is also connected to the performance of the mystery. If so, the Lord of Fortune must be an epithet for one of the deities we have suggested as the central figure in mystery.

Whatever the ultimate source of its use in the ritual, however, the author of the *Epistle* thought that he recognized the direct line of transmission, for he appended to his description of the initiation ritual the account of such an offering which concludes the *Phaedo*, wherein the dying Socrates reminds Crito, "We owe a cock to Asclepius. Don't neglect to pay it."[42] That the explication was given this particular Greek twist merely served to further demonstrate, in the eyes of the Brethren at least, the true source of the Harranians' knowledge. We have already recounted the Muslim version of the history of Greek philosophy, and it is likely that the preservation of Socrates' last words belongs within the context of that tradition.

We find an interesting confirmation of what happened when this interpretation of Greek philosophy was superimposed upon the older tradition preserved in the *Catalog* in Dimashqi's report of the Sabians' pilgrimages to the pyramids which contain the remains of the Agathodaimon and Hermes. There, they immolated a cock, through whose convulsions they asserted that they could know events hidden in the future.[43]

Connections between this performance and what is described in the *Catalog* both in the calendar and in the text of the mysteries seem vague. Although the number seven occurs in both texts in a number of contexts, its symbolism is by and large too diffuse to be of much value. In addition, the account of the sacrament performed in the "House of the Bughadharis" differs greatly from that in the *Epistles*; in the former, the period of initation lasts seven days and women are excluded, while according to the latter, the ceremony is completed with a night and a day, and one of the discourses is heard by the women (albeit separately). The Brethren report that the initiate is given only salt at the completion of the service; the "sons of *al-Bughadhariyin*" drink from seven cups and are given bread, salt and chicken, as well as the sacrament of wine.

---

[42] Plato, *Phaedo*, 118a.

[43] Dimashqi, *Cosmographie*, 35; Chwolsohn II, 410.

There are two possible links, however, between the Brethren's account and the Mystery to the North. The first is in the Epistle's description of the Temple, for it makes clear that the direction of worship is to the north.[44] The second is more tenuous and hinges on the identity of Jurjas and the god to whom the Mystery to the North is dedicated; if they both may be identified with some manifestation of Nergal/Ahriman, it is possible that both our texts are dealing with the same ritual. The discrepancies could then be explained by seeing the Brethren's account as a Hermeticized interpretation of the mystery.

Of all our sources for the existence of a mystery rite at Harran, only the calendar of Wahb ibn Ibrahim clearly places its performance within the context of other Harranian religious practices. The description of the "House of the Bughadharis" may serve to amplify the meaning of the Mystery to the North, especially if the deity addressed in both the calendar and the text is some localized form of Nergal/Ahriman or Sin/Shamash/Mithra, perhaps now dressed, however, in Persian garb. The version presented by the Brethren seems to fit a preconceived and overly schematized pattern; yet, at the same time, there are enough specific references to Harran elsewhere in their account to cause one to hesitate before dismissing it as merely a product of the Brethren's vision of reality.

The *Aim of the Sage*

The importance of the account in the *Aim of the Sage* of the initiation of young boys into the religion of the Sabians lies in its direct reference to Harran. The ceremony described seems to be only for those males not born in the city, but brought there by their parents in order to be enrolled in the religion of their ancestors. After undergoing a trial by ordeal in their "secret house" (*bayt sirr*) in order to determine their future purity and devotion to their religion, they are brought to another "dark temple" (*haykal muzlim*) where the ceremony takes place. "Noone who abandons the religion of the Sabians to embrace another can reveal their secret, because the priest has impressed upon them that he who does this dies instantly."[45]

Although there are points of similarity between this initiation and

---

[44] *Epistles* IV.301.

[45] De Goeje, "Nouveaux Documents," 336.

the one found in the *Epistles*, most notably the substitute offering of a cock, the accounts differ in two essential ways. According to the *Aim of the Sage*, the central deity who is addressed in a secret prayer is the Sun. Even more importantly, this version makes no mention of the revelation of a hidden knowledge by which an all-embracing wisdom might be gained, but rather seems to resemble a tribal initiation rite. It is also possible that what is found in the *Aim of the Sage* represents an abbreviated form of what is found in the *Epistles*; the fact that the Sun is the central deity may be a consequence of the work's emphasis on the planetary deities, while the absence of revelation may represent the practical approach to celestial magic.

Nevertheless, although the initiation rite described above is dedicated to the Sun, Saturn seems to have just as important a role in the *Ghayat*'s account of the Sabians as the Sun and more than any other of the planetary deities. He is first in order of the planets described, and the preparation of the sacrifice of a bull in his honor is given special prominence. Given the fact that Mars is addressed in this same passage as the Blind Lord, it is possible that both he and Saturn continue to represent the two aspects of Nergal as god of the underworld and as a god of violent disposition.

Masʿudi

Masʿudi's *Golden Meadows* provides our final description of the rites of the Harranians, derived, he says, from a poem (*qaṣidah*) by the qadi Ibn Ayshun of Harran. In his poem, this learned man mentions the Sabian temple which stood at the Raqqah gate and contained four underground chambers in which were placed idols that represented the different heavenly bodies and the higher beings and the mysteries of the idols. Masʿudi had previously described this temple, whose name is *Maghlitiya* (perhaps a transliteration of Megalatheia?), as dedicated to Azar, "the father of Abraham." (perhaps ʿUzzuz?) Into these chambers, the Sabians would bring their young children who became terrified by the strange sounds and voices which seemed to come from the statues on account of the mechanical devices used to create such an effect. The guardians of the temple, hidden behind the wall, were the source of these utterances; and their voices, transmitted by mechanical apparatus, seemed to come out of these same idols. In this way, they won out over reason and assured the obedience of the faithful.[46]

---

[46] Chwolsohn II, 381–83.

Although this account resembles in many way the description of the initiation rituals found in the *Aim of the Sage*, the building blocks of this temple by the Raqqah gate are easily discovered, gathered from those sacred places all over the ancient world at which the performance of daily miracles was one of the more durable consequences of Hellenistic science and technology. Numerous accounts attest to the ingenious mechanical devices which allowed statues of the deities to move, talk and then disappear in clouds of steam. As the 2nd century C.E. Hero of Alexandria remarked, science will be found useful "not only in providing the most fundamental requisites of civilized life but also in producing bewilderment and awe."[47] Nothing except the location of the Sabian temple, at the Raqqah gate, makes this account specific to Harran; and although the description is plausible, it is also possible that it is the product of one variant of the history of Greek science, a history that at least some Muslims rewrote according to their own spiritual guidelines. Their goal, the unity of knowledge, was not a new one, but the path taken was determined by yet another view of reality.

It is fitting that at least part of this new perspective was shaped by Harran, for it was a city that had been constructed over and over again in the imaginations of succeeding generations of Babylonians and Assyrians, Jews and Christians, Greeks, Arabs and Persians. Each built upon existing foundations, and every people who surveyed the city saw in its religious and intellectual fabric what they wanted and needed to see. It had been the possession of the Moon god, the site sacred to the memory of the patriarch Abraham, and the city of the Hellenes whose spiritual and intellectual legacy was the inheritance of Islam.

Conclusions

Through a 2,500 year long process of accretion and synthesis, Harran incorporated into its image of itself all of these realities, discarding none along the way. At every addition of another layer of belief, new interpretations of the old suggested themselves: Sin was the divine ruler of Harran, but he was also the giver of oracles and revelation. It was in this latter role that he was integrated into a Hermetic

---

[47] Benjamin Farringdon, *Greek Science* (Middlesex, 1969), 199.

interpretation of the world, even while never losing his other earlier functions. Persian rule imposed an ethical dualism upon the physical structures of the cosmos, but the power of the planetary divinities survived even as they were seen as the expressions of a transcendent reality. Abraham, patriarch of the Children of Israel, was enlisted by the Christians into their faith, even as later the Muslims made him the progenitor of the Arab people. The Greeks who followed Alexander brought with them their own intellectual baggage from the Academy and the Lycaeum, even while they sought out an older learning that they thought would lead to the hidden source of all wisdom.

It was this variety of perceptions that the Muslims inherited and in turn reshaped according their position on a distinctly Muslim issue, that of the identity of the Sabians of the *Qurʾan*. Whoever they might have been, they possessed, at least in the view of Muḥammad, a revealed scripture. The orthodox scrutinized the claims of the Harranians to be the Sabians through the prism of a literal reading of the *Qurʾan* and thereby accused its inhabitants of an ancient idolatry. Their rejection of the Harranians as the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* was based ultimately on a traditionalist reading of the sources. They were, after all, the people with whom Abraham had quarreled, and orthodox understanding followed closely that of the patriarch. The Shiʿites, intent in their search for a concealed meaning in these same scriptures, scrutinized the Harranians in an entirely different light. Given the city's dual inheritance of Abraham and the wisdom of the Moon god, Harran was established as a link in the chain of transmission of a revealed knowledge that would illuminate that search. But it had a dual Greek inheritance as well, and thus became a source not only of the intellectual constructs of a rationalist Greek philosophy by which those who were interested might examine their own faith, but of a world view grounded in the esoteric doctrines of Hermeticism. It was an inheritance that had made Plato and Aristotle, as well as Pythagoras and Hermes, into prophets and produced a literature of revelation, thereby enabling the more radical of the Shiʿite sects, such as the Brethren of Purity, to cast the Harranians as the Sabians of the *Qurʾan*. Ultimately, however, the question of the identity of the Sabians of the *Qurʾan* and their connection with Harran receded as an issue among the Shiʿites as the city found a place in their sacred map of Islam.

Both interpretations are grounded in historical truth and spiritual

reality. The evidence for the persistence of traditional Mesopotamian ritual and belief is everywhere in our texts, and undoubtedly these practices did survive at Harran into the Muslim period. At the same time, the history of the city demonstrates that it was open to the influence of a host of external religious traditions which had always allowed those who so wished to reinterpret the meaning of these practices.

Finally, the intellectual and spiritual journey to uncover the underlying coherence of the cosmos had taken many turns and detours since the time of the Presocratics, and Harran was a logical meeting place for all those who had taken up the search. The broad range of intellectual interests of a Thabit ibn Qurrah provides proof of the survival, in whatever form it might have taken, of Greek learning and rationalist methods of inquiry, even while the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity and the *Aim of the Sage* demonstrate to the achievement of what esoteric goals that tradition might be put.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Selected Arabic and Syriac Sources

ARABIC

al-Baghdadi, ᶜAbd al-Qahir ibn Ṭahir. *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*. Ed. Muḥammad Badr. Cairo, 1910.

——. *Moslem Sects and Schisms*. Trans. A.S. Halkin. Tel Aviv, 1935.

al-Baladhuri, al-Imam abu-l ᶜAbbas Aḥmad ibn Yaḥya ibn Jabir. *Kitab Futuḥ al-Buldan*. Ed. M.J. de Goeje. Leiden, 1866.

al-Biruni, Abu Rayhan Muḥammad ibn *Ahmad. *al-Athar al-Baqiyah ᶜan al-Qurun al Khaliyah*. Ed. C.E. Sachau. Leipzig, 1878.

——. *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*. Trans. C.E. Sachau. London, 1879.

Chwolsohn, D. *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*. 2 vols. St. Petersburg, 1856.

al-Dimashqi, Shams al-din Muḥammad ibn Abi Ṭalib. *Kitab Nukhbat al-Dahr fiᶜ Aja'ib al-Barr wa-al-Bahr (Cosmographie)*. Ed. and trans. C.M.J. Fraehn and A.F. Mehren. St. Petersburg, 1866.

Ibn al-Kalbi, Hisham ibn Muḥammad. *Kitab al-Aṣnam*. Cairo, 1924.

——. *The Book of Idols*. Trans. N.A. Faris. Princeton, 1952.

Ibn Khaldun, ᶜAbd al-Raḥman. *al-Muqaddimah*. Ed. A.A. Wafi. 4 vols. Cairo, 1957–1962.

——. *The Muqaddimah*. Bollingen Series XLIII. 3 vols. Trans. F. Rosenthal. Princeton, 1958.

Ikhwan al-Ṣafa'. *Rasaᶜil*. 12 vols. Beirut, 1957.

(Pseudo-) Majriti. *Das Ziel des Weisen (Ghayat al-Ḥakim)*. Ed. and trans. H. Ritter and M. Plessner. 2 vols. 1933 and 1962.

al-Masᶜudi, Abu al-Ḥasan ᶜAli ibn al-Ḥusayn. *Kitab Muruj al-Dhahab wa-Maᶜadin al Jawhar/Les Prairies d'Or*. (Arabic text with French translation). Ed. and trans. C. Barbier de Meynard and P. de Courteille. 9 vols. Paris, 1871–1877.

——. *Kitab al-Tanbiḥ*. Ed. M.J. de Goeje. Leiden, 1894.

al-Nadim, Abu al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Isḥaq Abu *Yaᶜqub al-Warraq. *Kitab al-Fihrist*. Ed. G. Flugel. Leipzig, 1871.

——. *The Fihrist of al-Nadim*. 2 vols. Ed. and trans. B. Dodge. New York, 1970.

al-Shahrastani, Muḥammad ibn ᶜAbd al-Karim. *Kitab al-Milal w'-al-Niḥal*. Ed. W. Cureton. London, 1842.

Yaqut, Shihab al-din ibn ᶜAbd Allah al-Ḥamawi. *Irshad al-Arib ala Maᶜrifat al-Adib (Yaqut's Dictionary of Learned Men)*. Ed. D.S. Margoliouth. 7 vols. Leiden, 1907–1927.

SYRIAC

Bar Hebraeus. *The Chronography of Bar Hebraeus*. Trans. E.A. Wallis Budge. Oxford, 1932.

Drijvers, H.J.W. *Old Syriac (Edessean) Inscriptions*. Leiden, 1972.

Ephraem Syrus. *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*. 2 vols. Ed. C.W. Mitchell. London, 1912–1921.

Ephraem Syrus. *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses*. CSCO 169–170. Ed. E. Beck. Louvain, 1957.

Isaacus Antiochenus. *S. Isaaci Antiocheni doctoris syrorum opera omnia*. 2 vols. Ed. G. Bickell. Gissae, 1873–77.

Job of Edessa. *The Book of Treasures*. Ed. and trans. A. Mingana. Cambridge, 1935.
Joshua the Stylite. *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*. Trans. W. Wright. Cambridge, 1882.
Landersdorfer, P.S. "Die Götterliste des mar Jacob von Sarug in seiner Homilie über der Fall der Götzenbilder. Ein religionsgeschichtliches Dokument aus der Zeit des untergehenden Heidentums." *Programm des Kgl. Gymnasium im Benediktiner Kloster Ettal für das Schuljahr 1913/1914*. Munich, 1914.
Phillips, G. *The Doctrine of Addai, the Apostle*. London, 1876.

Selected Secondary Sources

The Preislamic Period

Harran

Combe, E. *Histoire du Culte du Sin en Babylonie et Assyrie*. Paris, 1908.
Gadd, C.J. "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus." *Anatolian Studies* VIII (1958): 35–92.
Jensen, P. "Nik(k)al in Harran." *Zeitschrift für Assyrologie* 11 (1896): 293 ff.
Lewy, H. "Points of Comparison between Zoroastrianism and the Moon Cult of Harran." *A Locust's Leg*, ed. W.B. Henning. London, 1962.
Lloyd, S. and Brice, W. "Harran." *Anatolian Studies* I (1951): 77–112.
Mez, A. *Geschichte der Stadte Ḫarran in Mesopotamien bis zum Einfall der Araber*. Strassbourg, 1892.
Segal, J.B. *Edessa and Harran: an Inaugural Lecture*. London, 1963.

Mesopotamia

Bonner, C. *Studies in Magical Amulets*. London, 1950.
Budge, E.A.W. *Amulets and Superstitions*. London, 1930.
Chesney, R.C. *An Expedition for the Survey of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates*. London, 1850.
Dhorme, E. and R. Dussaud. *Les Religions de Babylonie et d'Assyrie*. Paris, 1949.
Dossin, G. "Benjamites dans les Textes du Mari." *Melanges Syriens Offerts a M. Rene Dussaud*. Paris, 1939.
Hooke, S.H. *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion*. Oxford, 1962.
——. *Middle Eastern Mythology*. London, 1963.
Jacobsen, T. *Treasures of Darkness*. New Haven, 1976.
——. *Toward an Image of Tammuz*. Edited by W.L. Mason. Cambridge, Mass., 1970.
——. *The Harps that Once. . .: Sumerian Poetry in Translation*. New Haven, 1987.
Kramer, S.N. *Sumerian Mythology*. Philadelphia, 1961.
Pritchard, J.B. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (ANET). 3rd ed. 2 vols. Princeton, 1969.
Segal, J.B. "Mesopotamian Communities from Julian to the Rise of Islam." *Proceedings of the British Academy* XLI (1955): 109–139.
Smith, S. *Babylonian Historical Texts*. London, 1924.
Thompson, R.C. *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers in the British Museum*. London, 1900.
——. *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia*. London, 1903.
Wiseman, D.J. *Chronicles Concerning Chaldaean Kings*. London, 1956.

Syria

Badger, G.P. *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*. London, 1852.
Baumstark, A. *Geschichte der Syrischen Literatur*. Bonn, 1922.
Brock, S. "From Ephrem to Romanos." *Studia Patristica* XX (1989), 139–151.
——. *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity*. London, 1984.
——. *Syriac Views of Emergent Islam*. Carbondale, 1982.
Brockelmann, C. *Geschichte der christlichen Litteraturen des Orient*. Leipzig, 1912.
Cameron, A. *The Sceptic and the Shroud, an Inaugural Lecture in the Departments of Classics and History delivered at King's College London on 29th April 1980*.
Cureton, W. *Ancient Syriac Documents Relative to the Earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the Neighboring Countries*. London, 1864.
Drijvers, H.J.W. *Bardaisan of Edessa*. Studia Semitica Neerlandica VI. Assen, Netherlands, 1966.
——. *The Book of the Laws of Countries*. Assen, Netherlands, 1965.
——. "The Cult of Azizos and Monimos at Edessa." *Ex Orbe Religionum* I. (1972): 355–371.
——. *Cults and Creeds at Edessa*. Leiden, 1980.
——. "The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria." *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, 35–45. Ed. N. Garsoian *et al.* Dunbarton Oaks, 1982.
Hayes, E.R. *L'ecole d'Edesse*. Paris, 1930.
Jones, A.H.M. *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*. 2nd ed. Oxford, 1971.
Klijn, A.F.J. *Edessa: der stad van de Apostel Thomas*. Baarn, 1962.
Peeters, P. "Encore le Coq Sacree d'Hierapolis." *Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques*. 5e serie, XXIX (1943): 274–310.
Pognon, H. *Inscriptions Semitiques de la Syria, de la Mesopotamie et de la Region de Mossoul*. Paris, 1907.
Rostovtzeff, I.M. *Caravan Cities*. Oxford, 1932.
Segal, J.B. *Edessa: the Blessed City*. Oxford, 1970.
——. "Pagan Syriac Monuments in the Vilayet of Urfa." *Anatolian Studies* III (1953): 97–120.
——. "Some Syriac Inscriptions of 2nd–3rd Century A.D." BSOAS XVI (1954): 13–36.
Seyrig, H. "Le Culte du Soleil en Syrie a L'Epoque Romaine." *Syria* XLVIII (1971): 337–373.
——. *Antiquites syriennes*. Paris, 1934.
Teixidor, J. *The Pagan God: Popular Belief in the Graeco-Roman Near East*. Princeton, 1977.
——. *The Pantheon of Palmyra*. Leiden, 1979.
Tubach, J. *Im Schatten des Sonnengottes: der Sonnenkult in Edessa, Harran und Hatra am Vorabend der christlichen Mission*. Wiesbaden, 1985.
van Berg, P. L. *Corpus Cultus Deae Syria*. 2 vols. EPRO 28. Leiden, 1972.
Winckworth, C. "On Heathen Deities in the Doctrine of Addai." *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1924): 402–403.
Wright, W. *A Short History of Syriac Literature*. London, 1894.

Palmyra and the Nabataeans

Drijvers, H.J.W. *The Religion of Palmyra*. Iconography of Religions XV. Leiden, 1976.
Gawlikowski, M. "Les Dieux des Nabateens." *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 18.4 (Berlin, 1990): 2659–2677.
Glueck, N. *Deities and Dolphins: the Story of the Nabataeans*. New York, 1965.

Ingholt, H. "Inscriptions and Sculptures from Palmyra." *Berytus* V, pt. 2 (1938): 93–140.

Arabia and the Arabs

Dussaud, R. *La Penetration des Arabes en Syrie Avant l'Islam.* Paris, 1907.
Fahd, T. *La Divination Arabe.* Leiden, 1966.
Henninger, J. "Uber Sternkunde un Sternkulte in Nord- und Zentral Arabien." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 79 (1954): 82–117.
——. *Arabica Sacra.* Gottingen, 1981.
Wellhausen, J. *Reste arabischen Heidentums.* 3rd ed. Berlin, 1961.

Mithraism

Bivar, A.D.H. "Mithra and Mesopotamia." *Mithraic Studies* II (1975): 275–289.
Campbell, LeRoy A. *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology.* Leiden, 1968.
Drijvers, H.J.W. "Mithra at Hatra?" Some Remarks on the Problem of Irano-Mesopotamian Syncretism." *Acta Iranica, Textes et Memoires* IV (1978): 151–186.

Mandaeans, Manichaeans and Zoroastrianism

Brandt, W. *Die Mandaische Religion.* Leipzig, 1889.
——. *Elchasai ein Religionsstifter und sin Werk.* Leipzig, 1912.
Drower, E.S. *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.* Oxford, 1937.
Geze, H. and K. Rudolph. *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens und der Mandaer.* Stuttgart, 1970.
Henrichs, A. "Mani and the Babylonian Baptists: A Historical Confrontation." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77 (1973): 23–59.
Luttikhuizen, G. *The Revelation of Elchasai.* Tubingen, 1985.
Pallis, S.A. *Mandaean Studies.* London, 1926.
Ries, J. "La Formation de la Pensee manicheene de 'elchaisme a la gnose." *Studia Patristica* XIX (1987): 328–336.
Rudolph, K. "Die Bedeutung des Kölner Mani-Codex für die Manichaismus Forschung." *Melanges d'Histoire des religions offerts a Henri Puech* (1976): 471–486.
——. *Die Mandaer.* 2 vols. Gottingen, 1960.
——. *Mandaeism.* Iconography of Religions XXI. Leiden, 1978.
Taqizadeh, S. "The Iranian Festivals Adopted by the Christians and Condemned by the Jews." BSOAS X/3 (1940): 632–653.
——. "A New Contribution to the Life of Zoroaster." BSOAS VII (1937): 947–954.
Widengren, G. *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism.* Studies in Manichaean, Mandaean and Syrian-Gnostic Religion. Uppsala, 1946.
Yamauchi, E.M. *Mandaic Incantation Texts.* American Oriental Series 49. New Haven, 1967.
Zaehner, R.C. "Postscript to Zurvan." BSOAS XVII/2 (1955): 232–250.

Ancient Science and the Hermetic tradition

Berthelot, M.P.E. *Collection des anciens alchemiste grecs* (Greek text with French trans.). 3 vols. Paris, 1888.
Bidez, J. and F. Cumont. *Les Mages Hellenises.* 2 vols. Paris, 1938.
Bouche-Leclerq, A. *L'Astrologie Grecque.* Paris, 1899.
Dihle, A. "Astrology in the Doctrine of Bardesanes." *Studia Patristica* XX (1989): 160–168.
Drijvers, H.J.W. "Bardaisan of Edessa and the Hermetica." *Jaarbericht ex Oriente Lux* XXI (1970): 190–210.
Dzielska, M. *Apollonius of Tyana in Legend and History.* Rome, 1986.

Hadot, I., ed. *Simplicius: sa Vie, son Oeuvre, sa Survie*. Berlin, 1987.
Holmyard, E.J. *Alchemy*. London, 1957.
Jonas, H. *The Gnostic Religion*. Boston, 1967.
Lewy, H. *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*. Nouvelle edition par Michel Tardieu. Paris, 1978.
Neugebauer, O. *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity*. Providence, 1957.
Rochberg-Halton, F. "New Evidence for the History of Astrology." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43 (1984): 115–140.
Sheppard, H.J. "Gnosticism and Alchemy." *Ambix* VI, no. 2 (December, 1957): 86–101.
Singer, D.W. "Alchemical Texts Bearing the Name of Plato." *Ambix* II, nos. 3–4 (1938): 115–128.
Taylor, F. S. "The Origins of Greek Alchemy." *Ambix* I, no. 1 (May, 1937): 30–48.
von Lippmann, E.O. "Some Remarks on Hermes and Hermetica." *Ambix* II, no. 1 (June, 1938): 21–25.

Islam and the Islamic World

Brockelmann, C. *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*. 2 vols. Leiden, 1943–1949.
Corbin, H. *Histoire de la philosophie islamique. Paris, 1964.*
Cresswell, K.A.C. *Early Muslim Architecture*. Vol. I, pt. 2. 2nd ed. Oxford, 1969.
Duri, A.A. *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs*. Trans. L.I. Conrad. Princeton, 1983.
Encyclopaedia of Islam. First edition: Leiden, 1913–1942. Second edition: Leiden, 1961–.
Fakhry, M. *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. New York, 1970.
Faris, A.A. and H.W. Glidden. "The Development of the Meaning of the Koranic Hanif." *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* XIX (1939): 1–13.
Goldziher, I. *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*. Trans. A. and R. Hamori. Princeton, 1981.
——. *Muhammedanische Studien*. Halle, 1888–1890.
Gotje, H. *The Quran and Its Exegesis*. California, 1976.
Hodgson, M.G.S. *The Venture of Islam*. Chicago, 1974.
Jeffery, A. *The Foreign Vocabulary in the Qur'an*. Baroda, 1938.
Khadduri, M. *The Origin and Development of Islamic Law*. Washington, D.C., 1955.
Lewis, B. *The Jews of Islam*. Princeton, 1984.
LeStrange, G. *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*. London, 1966.
Monnot, G. "Les Ecrits Musulmans sur les Religions non-Bibliques." MIDEO XI (1972): 5–48.
Peters, F.E. *Allah's Commonwealth*. New York, 1973.
——. *Aristotle and the Arabs*. New York, 1968.
——. *The Children of Abraham*. Princeton, 1982.
Rosenthal, F. *A History of Muslim Historiography*. 2nd ed. Leiden, 1968.
Schacht, J. *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. Oxford, 1950.
Schwazbaum, H. *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends in Islamic Folk Literature*. Waldorf-Hessen, Germany, 1987.
Sprenger, A. *Das Leben und die Lehre Mohammad*. Berlin, 1869.
Sezgin, F. *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*. 9 volumes. Leiden, 1967–1984.
Tritton, A.S. "Islam and the Protected Religions." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. April, 1931: 313–338.
Watt, M. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*. Edinburgh, 1985.

Shiᶜites, Ismaᶜilis and the Ikhwan al-Ṣafaᵓ

Dussaud, R. *Histoire et Religion des Nosairis*. Paris, 1900.
Empson, R.H.W. *The Cult of the Peacock Angel*. London, 1928.
Halm, H. *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der Frühen Ismaᶜiliya*. Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, Band xliv, i. Weisbaden, 1978.
Halm, H. *Die Schiᶜa*. Dormstadt, 1988.
Ivanow, W. *A Guide to Ismaili Literature*. London, 1933.
Lewis, B. *The Origins of Ismaᶜilism*. Cambridge, 1940.
Madelung, W. *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam*. London, 1985.
——. *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran*. Albany, 1988.
Marquet, Y. "Jabir ibn Ḥayyam et les Iḫwan *al-Ṣafaᵓ." *Studia Islamica* LXIV (1986): 39–52.
——. *La Philosophie des Iḫwan al-Ṣafaᵓ: L'Imam et la Societe*. Dakar, 1973.
——. "Les Epitres des Iḫwan al-Ṣafaᵓ, Oeuvre Ismailienne." *Studia Islamica* LXI (1985): 57–80.
Massignon, L. *Essai sur les Origines du Lexique Technique de la Mystique musulmane*. Paris, 1922.
Netton, I. *Muslim Neoplatonists*. London, 1982.
Stern, S.M. "The Authorship of the Epistles of the Ikhwan al-Safa." *Islamic Culture* XX.4 (1946): 367–372.
——. "New Information about the Authors of the Epistles of the Sincere Brethren." *Islamic Studies* III.4 (1964): 405.
——. *Studies in Early Isma'ilism*. Leiden, 1983.
Widengren, G. "The Pure Brethren and the Philosophical Structure of their System," 57–69, *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*. Ed. A.T. Welch and P. Cachia. Edinburgh, 1979.

Islamic Science and the Hermetic tradition

Affifi, A.E. "The Influence of Hermetic Literature on Moslem Thought." BSOAS 13 (1950): 840–855.
Burnett, C. "The Legend of the Three Hermes and Abu Ma'shar's *Kitab al-Uluf* in the Latin Middle Ages." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXXIX (1976): 231–234.
Fahd, T. "Retour a Ibn WaḤshiya." *Arabica* 16 (1969).
Fück, J.W. "The Arabic Literature on Alchemy According to an-Nedim." *Ambix* IV, nos. 3–4 (February, 1951): 81–144.
Hartner, W. "Notes on *Picatrix*." *Isis* 56 (1965): 438–451.
Heym, G. "Al-Razi and Alchemy." *Ambix* I, no. 3 (March, 1938): 184–191.
Holmyard, E.J. *The Arabic Works of Jabir ibn Ḥayyan*. Paris, 1928.
Kahane, H. and R. and A. Pietrangeli. "*Picatrix* and the Talismans." *Romance Philology* XIX, no. 4 (May, 1966): 574–593.
Kraye, J., F. Ryan and C.B. Schmitt, eds. *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages*. London, 1986.
Massignon, L., "l'Hermetisme Arabe." *La Revelation d'Hermes Trismegiste* I, ed. R.P. Festugiere. Paris, 1950.
Nasr, S.H. *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine*. Cambridge, Mass., 1964.
O'Leary, D. *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*. London, 1948.
Pingree, D. "Greek Infuence on Islamic Astronomy." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93.1 (1973): 32–43.
——. "Masha'allah: Some Sassanian and Syriac Sources." *Essays on Islamic Philosophy and Science*, ed. George F. Housani. Albany, 1975.

——. "Some of the Sources of the *Ghayat al-Ḥakim*." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XLIII (1980): 1–15.
Plessner, M. "Hermes Trismegistus and Arab Science." *Studia Islamica* II (1954): 45–60.
——. "The Place of the *Turba Philosophorum* in the Development of Alchemy." *Isis* 45 (1954): 331–338.
——. *Vorsokratische Philosophie und Griechische Alchemie*. Wiesbaden, 1975.
Ruska, J. *Arabische Alchemisten*. Heidelberg, 1924.
——. *Tabula Smaragdina: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Hermetischen Literatur*. Heidelberg, 1926.
Steele, R. and D.W. Singer. "The Emerald Table." *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* XXI (1928): 41–57.
Stern, S.M. and R. Walzer. *Greek into Arabic*. Oxford, 1962.

The Sabians of Harran

Chwolsohn, D. *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*. 2 vols. St Petersburg, 1856.
Corbin, H. "Rituel Sabeen et Exegese Ismailienne du Rituel." *Eranos Jahrbuch* XIX (1950): 181–246.
de Goeje, M.J. "Memoire posthume de M. Dozy contenant de Nouveaux documents pour l'etude de la religion des Harraniens, acheve par M.J. de Goeje." *Travaux de la 6e session du Congress International des Orientalistes* II (1884): 283–366.
Dodge, B. "The Sabians of Harran." *American University of Beirut Festival Book*, 60–85. Ed. F. Sarruf. Beirut, 1967.
Hjarpe, J. *Analyse Critique des Traditions Arabes sur les Sabeens Harraniens*. Uppsala, 1972.
——. "The Holy Year of the Harranians." *Orientalia Suecana* XXIII–XXIV (1974–75): 68–83.
Margoliouth. D.S. "Harranians." *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* VI. 1913: 519–520.
Marquet, Y. "Sabeens et Iḫwan al-Ṣafaʾ." *Studia Islamica* XXIV–XXV (1966): 35–80; 77–109.
Monnot, G. "Sabeens et Idolatres selon ʿAbd al-Jabbar." MIDEO XII (1974): 13–48.
Pedersen, J. "The Sabians." *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne on His 60th Birthday*. Ed. T.W. Arnold and R.A. Nicholson. Cambridge, 1922.
Rice, D.S. "Medieval Harran." *Anatolian Studies* II (1952): 36–84.
——. "A Muslim Shrine at Harran." BSOAS XVII/3 (1955): 436–438.
Rosenthal, F. *Aḥmad b. At-Ṭayyib As-Saraḫsi. A Scholar and Litterateur of the Ninth Century*. American Oriental Series 26. New Haven, 1943.
——. "The Prophecies of Baba the Harranian." *A Locust's Leg*, 220–232. Ed. W.B. Henning. London, 1962.
Segal, J.B. "Sabian Mysteries." *Vanished Civilizations*, 201–220. Ed. Edward Bacon. New York, 1963.
Tardieu, M. "Sabiens Coraniques et Sabiens de Harran." *Journal Asiatique* 274 (1986): 1–44.

GENERAL INDEX

ʿAbbasids 95, 130
ʿAbd al-Jabbar 133
Abgar II of Edessa 47, 48
Abgar V of Edessa 76
Abu Yaḥya al-Marwazi 168
Abu Ḥanifa 112
Abu al-Ḥudhayl 131
Abu Bakr 126
Adad-Guppi 21, 27, 37, 38
Adad-Nirari I 20
al-ʿAdil, Malik 99
Afranius 47
alchemy 90 ff., 176 ff.
Alexander of Macedon 2, 44, 81
ʿAli (son-in law of Muhammad) 94, 127, 128, 143, 203
Allah 131, 132, 134
Alp Arslan 97
Ammisaduqa 42
Ashʿarites 134, 166
al-Ashʿari, ʿAli ibn Ismaʿil 133, 134
Ashurbanipal 21, 30, 33, 36, 37
Ashurnirari V 27, 36
Ashur-Uballit II 21
al-ʿAskari, Ḥasan 128
astrology 175 ff.
Ayyubids 100

Baladhuri 2, 94
Baldwin 98
Balinus (Apollonius of Tyana) 178
Balkhi 135
Barmacids 138, 176, 178
Barsai 55, 56
Bashir 92
Battani 176
Bayt al-Ḥikmah 132, 136, 176
Bohemund 98
Brahma 179
Brethren of Purity 111, 146, 164, 181 ff., 188, 205, 207 ff., 216

Caracalla 27, 28, 49, 65
Cleopatra 92
Commodus 49
Constantine 52
Crassus 47, 65
Crusaders 98
Cyrus 39, 44

Daḥḥak al-Dayy 137
al-Dawlah, Naṣr 97
Diocletian 50
Dionysius (Bishop of Tel Mahre) 80, 180

Egeria of Aquitania 55
Elagabalus 64
Elbus 80
Epiphanius 119
Esarhaddon 36, 37, 65
Eumenes 44

Faṭimids 96, 97
Franks 98

Galerius 50
Gökbüri 99
Gordian III 49

Hadrian 48
Ḥakim (Fatimid caliph) 96
Hammurabi 35, 36
Ḥanbal, Aḥmad ibn 133
Ḥanbalis 133
al-Ḥarawi, ʿAli 13
Harun al-Rashid 4, 95, 121, 136, 176, 177, 178, 180
Heraclius 54
Hero of Alexandria 215
Hulagu 100

Iblis 208
Ibn Taymiyah 172
Ibn Waththab, Shabib 97
Ibraḥim ibn Hilal 122, 173
Idris 13, 170, 171, 181
Ikhwan al-Ṣafaʾ (see Brethren of Purity)
Ismaʿilis 128, 129, 139, 140, 141, 143, 164, 166, 171, 177, 181, 183, 184, 188
Iyadh al-Ghanam 2, 94, 97, 121

Jabir ibn Ḥayyan 177, 178, 186
Jacob (Bishop of Edessa) 89
Jaʿfar al-Ṣadiq 128, 139, 177

Jaḥiẓ 132
John Curcuas 95
Joscelyn de Courtenay 98
Jovian 51
Julia Maesa 64
Julian 27, 47, 50, 51, 52, 62, 115
Julianus (theurgist) 87, 180
Justinian I 53

Khalid ibn Yazid 136, 177
Khawad 52, 53
Khosraw I 53
Khosraw II 54
Khwarismians 100

Lucius Verus 48
Lucius Vitellius 48

Mamluks 100
Maʾmun 4, 5, 100, 103, 106, 108, 120, 121, 123, 136, 144, 147, 163, 165, 170, 178, 189
al-Manṣur, Abu Jaʿfar 95, 176
Mark Antony 47
Marwan II 95, 120
Mashaʾallah, 176
Matiʾilu of Arpad 27, 36
Maurice 54
Mithridates I 45
Mithridates II 45, 46
Mithridates VI of Pontus 46
Mongols 100
Morienus 177
Muʿawiya 94, 127
Mughtasila 102, 105, 108, 109
Muḥammad (Prophet) 15, 105, 107, 109, 110, 111, 113, 119, 125, 140, 141, 142, 143, 166
Muḥammad ibn Musa 112
Muḥammad ibn Ismail 128, 141
Mundhir III of Hira 53, 62
Muqtadir 146, 180
Mutawakkil 75, 168
Muʿtazilites 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 142, 163, 181

Nabonassar 42
Nabonidus 2, 21, 27, 34, 37, 38, 39, 42, 51, 59, 67, 69, 79, 154
Nabopolassar 34
Naburimanni 43
Narseh 50
Nebuchudnezzar 34, 116
Nimrod 44
Numan II of Hira 52, 53
Numayri, Watthab ibn Sabiq 96
Numayrids 96, 97
Nur al-Din 99
Nusayris 181, 203

Odenath of Palmyra 50
Ostanes 92

Pertinax 49
Pescennius Niger 49
Philip the Arab 49
Pompey 46
Ptolemy 113

Quwayri 168

Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa 77
Razi 123
Roger Bacon 163
Romanus Diogenes 97

Ṣabi 117, 174
Sabians 3, 5, 18, 100, 101 ff., 103, 104, 106, 107, 108, 109, 111, 112, 115, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 125, 133, 135, 137, 146, 147, 148, 159, 162, 163, 166, 168, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 176, 182, 183, 186, 187, 188, 189, 197, 202, 205, 208, 209, 213, 214, 215, 216
Sadarnunna 27, 38
Saladin 1, 99
Salm 176
Sargon 20
Sasanians 135
Seleucus I 44
Seljuks 97, 100
Septimius Severus 49
Shalmaneser III 21
Shamalis 203
Shamshi-Adad I 19
Shapur I 49
Shapur II 50
Sharaf al-Dawlah 97, 121
Shiʿites 118, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 142, 169, 189
Sophronius (Bishop of Tella) 84
Stephanos of Alexandria (alchemist) 92, 177
Sulla 46
Sunnis 170

Surena 47

Tancred of Antioch 98
Taybars, ʿAla' al-din 100
Thabit ibn Qurra 112, 113, 114, 147, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 168, 171, 176, 180, 217
Thaddeus 76
Theodore bar Konai 89
Theodosius 77
Thoros 98
Thumamah ibn Ashras 132
Tiberius 48
Tiglath-Pileser I 20
Tigranes 46
Tinkalus 176
Tiridates III 48
Trajan 48

ʿUmar 126, 127
ʿUmar II 120
Ummayads 94, 95
Ur-Nammu 27, 36
ʿUthman 127, 128

Valerian 49

William of Tyre 98

Yaḥya ibn al-Shatir 97
Yuḥanna ibn Ḥaylan 168

Zangi 98, 99
Zosimus (alchemist) 90, 92, 180

AUTHORS CITED

Preislamic

Ammianus Marcellinus 1, 27, 47, 50, 51, 65
Augustine 10

Berossus 83

Dio Cassius 47, 48, 49
Diodorus Siculus 44
Doctrina Addai 57, 63, 70, 76, 84, 146, 202

Ephrem Syrus 28, 56, 75, 77, 88, 89, 146, 202
Euclid 113
Eusebius 76, 88
Ezekiel 200

Herodian 27
Hippolytus 102
Homer 115

Isaac of Antioch 55, 58, 63, 77
Ishodad of Merw 136
Isidore of Antioch 61

Jacob of Sarug 57, 60, 61, 70, 75, 77, 146, 204

Libanius 52

Plutarch 28, 47
Procopius 55, 56

Sozomen 50, 56

Theodoret 51, 55

Zosimus 50

Muslim period

Abu Maʿshar 137, 138, 139

Baghdadi 117, 122, 124, 134, 166, 170
Bar Hebraeus 92, 113, 114, 121, 144
Benjamin of Tudela 11, 13
Biruni 80, 109, 115, 116, 117, 121, 124, 137, 138, 143, 145, 147, 149, 150, 151, 154, 155, 157, 161, 164, 171, 175, 192, 193, 198, 201, 202

Dimashqi 96, 117, 173, 174, 179, 188, 202, 212

Epistles of the Brethren of Purity 156, 180, 181 ff., 189, 191, 207 ff., 212, 217

Farabi 167

Ghayat al-Hakim 155, 179, 186 ff., 188, 191, 213 ff., 217

Ḥashimi 148, 149, 150, 152, 191, 194, 198, 202
Ḥunayn ibn Ishaq 75

Ibn al-ʿAbbas 12
Ibn al-ʿAdim 172
Ibn Ḥawqal 13
Ibn Ḥazm 106, 107, 110
Ibn Hisham 106
Ibn Ishaq, Muḥammad 106

Ibn al-Jawzi 133
Ibn Jubayr 13, 99
Ibn al-Kalbi 60, 61, 64
Ibn al-Nadim 4, 6, 39, 69, 89, 100, 101, 105, 108, 121, 124, 133, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 144, 146, 149, 150, 161, 165, 168, 175, 176, 178, 188, 191, 192, 197, 202, 204
Ibn Nawbakht 136, 137, 139
Ibn Qutayba 142
Ibn Shaddad 97, 121
Ibn Taymiyah 133
Ibn Waḥshiya 187, 188, 202

Jaḥiẓ 142
Joshua the Stylite 77

Kaʿb al-Aḥbar 12
Khwarizmi 122
Kindi 132, 135, 138, 142, 163, 164, 165, 166, 169, 171
Kisaʾi 13

Maimonides, 101
Majriti 179
Masʿudi 71 f., 108, 115, 116, 117, 123, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 172, 173, 174, 188, 191, 214 ff.
Michael Syrus 88

Nawbakht 176

al-Qatiyʿi, Abu Yusuf Ishaʿ 120, 147, 178
Qifti 206
Qurʾan 3, 4, 5, 12, 15, 17, 18, 61, 100, 101, 103, 104, 105, 107, 108, 113, 117, 119, 120, 122, 125, 126, 129, 130, 131, 134, 135, 140, 141, 143, 162, 166, 170, 173, 184, 216

Razi 168, 169

Sarakhsi 132, 142, 147, 153, 154, 157, 163, 164, 166, 170, 183, 188, 192, 202, 203, 210
Shahrastani 108, 110, 123, 131, 134, 166, 174, 182, 184

Tabari 95, 106, 142

Wahb ibn Ibraḥim 146, 147, 149, 151, 152, 155, 194, 196, 197, 198, 211, 213

Yaqut 145, 149, 151, 173

PLACE NAMES

Acre 96
Adiabene 20, 45, 78
Aleppo 54, 96, 100
Alexandria 120, 167, 177, 182
Amida 50, 95, 98
Anah 20
Antioch 20, 54, 57, 167, 168
Antioch on the Callirhoe (Edessa) 44
Arab 68 f.
Asagi Yarimca 27
Athens 167

Babylon 112, 117, 176
Baghdad 136, 137, 138, 147, 167, 168, 176
Balkh 137
Basra 88, 117
Batnae 159
Beth Hur 55, 58, 61, 63, 152
Borsippa 34, 91
Byblos 68

Caesarea 96
Carrhae (Harran) 47

Damascus 96
Dayr Sini 151, 153
Dayr Kadhi 150, 151, 153, 155, 156, 186, 187, 198, 209
Dhabana 151
Diyar-Mudhar 122
Dura Europus 60, 201

Edessa 1, 2, 5, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 60, 61, 63, 75 ff., 87, 93-96, 152, 202
Eleusis 82
Emesa 62, 64

Gesh 25
Gordyene 45

Harran 10-14, 19-22, 43-54, 94-100 et passim
Hatti 36
Hatra 202
Hierapolis 61
Hira 135
Hit 20

Jerusalem 54
Jundi-Shapur 177

Kabah 12, 107, 201
Karran (Harran) 44
Kufa 135
Kullab 25

Larsa 25

Mabbug (Hierapolis) 57, 58, 60
Malatiyah 20
Manzikert 97
Mari 19, 36
Mawsil 97
Mecca 60, 105, 125, 142
Medina 60, 105, 125, 142
Mitanni 36

Nazareth 96
Nineveh 20
Nippur 25, 35, 91
Nisibis 2, 20, 48, 49, 50, 51, 55, 75, 95, 112, 177

Orhay (Edessa) 44
Osrhoene 45, 50

Palmyra 26, 47, 61, 68, 69

Raqqah 96, 122

Sabta 150, 153
Salamsin 145
Samosata 95, 98
Sarug 50, 95, 96, 98, 159
Serin 68
Sumatar Harabesi 39, 49, 65 ff.

Taima 37, 38
Tar-ʿUz 145
Tigranocerta 47
Tyre 61, 68

Ugarit 68
Ur 19, 25, 35, 37, 38

Wasiṭ 88, 117, 173

PRE-ISLAMIC RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Mesopotamian and Semitic (including deities listed by Muslim sources)

Adonis 158
Aglibol 26, 69
akitu festival 30, 156, 157, 205
Allah 61
Allat 61
An 25
Anath 194
Anu 31
Anunnaki 31
Ashur 39
Astarte 61, 67
astral religion 39-43
Atargatis 57, 59, 60, 61
Attis 197
Azizos and Monimos 61, 62

Baal 194
Baʿalshamen 57, 59, 61, 67, 68, 69, 81, 152, 155, 203
Baba 171, 172, 195
Baltha 150, 158
Bar Nemre 57, 69 f., 152
Bar Daysan 28, 88 ff., 202
Bath Nikkal 57, 58, 59, 63, 152, 157
Bel 57, 61, 69, 147, 152, 153
Belit-Seri (Venus) 35, 147
belomanteia 200 ff.
Beltis 61
Blind, Lord of 150, 151, 155, 160, 195, 196, 214
Bughadharis 191, 196, 203 ff., 212

Dea Syria 59
Dogs, My Lord with 152

Ea 31
Enlil 25, 29, 34, 35, 156

Feast of Birth 153

Gadlat 58, 59, 152

Hadad 60
Ḥarranit 196
Hathor 26
Hours, Lord of 150, 151, 155, 198, 199
Hubal 201

Idris 117
Inanna 59
Irra 32
Ishtar 29, 59, 63, 158
Isis 26, 92

jinns 150
Jurjas 208, 209, 211, 213

Malakbel 64, 69
Manat 60, 61
Marduk 30, 31, 32, 33, 37, 39, 71
Mara-Samya 155
Mars (see also Mara-Samya and Mirrikh) 154, 187, 195, 196, 214
Mirrikh 150, 153, 155, 159, 160
Mughtasila 119
North, Mysteries to (see also Shamal) 150, 153, 191 ff., 200, 202 ff., 211, 213
Moon god (see also Luna, Lunus, Nabu, Nanna, Selene, Sin, Thoth) 10, 14, 17, 22, 49, 55, 62, 65, 89, 149, 50, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 178, 189, 193, 194, 197, 203, 216
Mrlh' 67 f.

Nabu (Nebo) 33, 34, 57, 70f., 85, 86, 87, 136, 152
Nanna 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 34, 35, 36
Nergal 29, 30, 32, 60, 62, 154, 155, 156, 157, 195, 198, 199, 201, 204, 210, 213, 214
Ningal (Nikkal) 21, 27, 36, 38, 59, 196
Ninlil 29
Nusku 27, 31, 34, 36, 38, 70

Pazuzu 195
planetary cult 159 ff.
Rabbat al-Thill 158
al-Ra's 178, 179, 180

Sabazios 81
Salugha 193, 194
Saturn (see also Zuhal) 154, 187, 195, 198, 200, 208, 214
Shamal 193, 194
Shamash (see also Sun god) 32, 36, 64, 69, 159, 193, 202, 203, 206, 213
Sin 21, 23, 25, 27, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 57, 59, 65, 67, 69, 72, 82, 85, 86, 159, 193, 196, 198, 203, 206, 213, 215
Sun god (see also Shamash and Utu) 57, 58, 61, 63, 64, 69, 152, 192, 193, 194, 203, 213
Sw'r 171

Tammuz 29, 147, 152, 158
Tar'atha 57, 58, 59, 61, 152, 157, 159
Thoth 71, 85, 92, 136, 139
Tiamat 30, 39
Tyrannic Star 156

Uṭarid (see also Hermes) 139, 178, 179
Utu 24
utukki limnuti 31
'Uzza 58, 61, 62, 64, 68, 152, 157, 183

Venus (see also Baltha and Zuḥarah) 42, 62, 150, 151

Yarhibol 26

Zuḥal 150, 153, 155
Zuḥarah 150, 158

Persian

Ahriman 73, 198, 199, 200, 204, 210, 213
Ahura Mazda 79, 210

Elbus 172

Hoshang 71

Kayumarth 137, 138

Mithra 64, 79, 85, 91, 175, 197, 199, 201, 203, 204, 209, 210, 211, 213

Ohrmazd 79, 198, 200

Walis (Elbus) 171, 172
Water, Idol of the 156

Zoroaster 79, 80, 115, 171, 198
Zoroastrianism 73, 79 ff., 82, 85, 136, 189, 195, 199
Zurvan 198, 199

Biblical, Judaism and Christianity

Abraham 1, 2, 11-14, 15, 55, 104, 107,

110, 114, 115, 119, 140, 214, 215, 216
Adam 116, 140, 171, 173
Adonai 81

Elchasai 102
Elijah 1
Elkesaites 102, 103, 105, 108, 109, 119, 195
Enoch 116, 137, 170, 171, 183, 184
Enos 110
Ezekiel 19

Gospels 184

Ishmael 12

Jacob (patriarch) 11, 55, 60
Jesus 76, 140
Judaism 85

Mandaeans 102, 104, 105, 106, 108, 109, 111, 119, 192, 195, 205 ff.
mandylion 76, 77, 78, 95
Mani 89, 108, 119
Manichaeans 80, 82, 108, 180, 189, 195
Miriam (sister of Moses) 92
Moses 92, 140

Nestorianism 80, 84
Noah 13, 140

Rachel 60

Sarah 14
Seth 13, 110, 116, 117, 141, 171, 173

Terah 11
Torah 184

Yahweh 201

Greek and Roman

Abraxas (Iao) 211
Academy 87, 167
Agathodaimon 103, 110, 115, 116, 117, 171, 172, 173, 174, 182, 212
Aion 198, 200
Aphrodite 61
Apollo 57, 71
Arani 171, 173
Aratos 172, 182
Ares 154
Aristotelianism 171, 185, 186
Aristotle 92, 113, 136, 150, 163, 164, 165, 176, 178, 181, 216
Asclepios 117, 138, 210, 212

Cerberus 72
Cybele 61

Damascius 167
Democritus 92, 169, 178
Dionysus 81, 197

Epicureanism 185
Eros 156

gnosticism 116, 118, 159

Hecate 85, 209
Heracles 67
Hermes 71, 85, 110, 115, 117, 136, 137, 138, 139, 150, 153, 165, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 176, 178, 182, 184, 206, 212, 216
Hermetic tradition 85 ff., 103, 116, 117, 135, 159, 162 ff., 169, 170, 171, 172, 174, 175, 177, 188, 189, 209
Homer 172, 182

Io 26

Jupiter 50, 81, 180

Kronos 155, 160, 198, 200, 203

Luna 27
Lunus 28

Neoplatonism 65, 87, 90, 91, 111, 116, 135, 159, 165, 167, 168, 175, 181, 188, 203
Neopythagoreanism 111, 116, 175, 189

Orpheus 71, 172, 173

Persephone 210
Plato 85, 86, 136, 165, 166, 171, 172, 181
Platonism 84, 171
Plotinus 87, 165
Ploutos 151
Porphyry 87, 172
pre-Socratics 82, 91, 169, 174
Proclus 180, 200

Pythagoras 182, 216
pythagoreanism 181, 185, 210

Selene 27, 28, 65
Sibylline oracles 172
Simplicius 150, 167
Socrates 178, 212
Sol Invictus 64, 210
Solon 171
Stoicism 85, 93, 175, 185, 186

theurgy 87, 89, 209
Tyche 60, 61

Venus 59, 64, 159

Zeus 81

ARABIC TERMS

ahl al-kitab 3, 12

baṭin 140, 141, 143
baṭiniyyah 124, 129, 170

dhimmis 2, 5

falsafah 124, 130, 134, 170
fiqh 124, 125, 126, 127, 129, 133, 141

ghulat 128, 129

ḥadith 126, 127, 142
ḥanif 12, 107, 110, 111, 113, 114, 115, 116, 118, 181, 182, 183, 184
haqaʾiq 140
ḥikmah 170

ijmaᶜ 127
ᶜIlm 125, 126, 127, 129, 143

Imam 128, 140-141, 143, 184

kalam 124, 130, 133, 135

madhahib 167
Mahdi 128, 129, 140, 141, 184

qiyas 127

raʾy 127

Shariᶜah 127
ṣinaᶜah 177
sunnah 126, 131

taᶜrikh 142

ẓahir 140
zanadiqa 124